Revision History

2.0 Version

* I removed Mab, the cook, from the chapters after Siri’s first encounter with her.
* I tried to trip references that mentioned exact numbers of Breath when talking about BioChroma. My feeling was that the first draft was to exact in this regard, and made the magic feel too video-game like.
* In the chapter where Siri first enters the Court of Gods and the God King’s palace, I made her more nervous and slightly more timid.
* Standardized some naming. Klad the Usurper. Manywar. Peacegiver. Others.
* Fixed consistancy with Siri’s soldiers, her period of Wedding Jubilation, etc.
* Returned now need to feed on Breath once a week, rather than once a day.
* Awakening now requires color to work--it’s not optional.
* Numerous line edits for clarity, consision, character consistancy, and pacing.
* Curses are now more focused on local religons, to give the setting more strength.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

 Hi! My name is Brandon Sanderson, and first off, I’d like to say thanks for reading my book! I hope you enjoy it.

 In case you don’t know, I’m a professional fantasy novelist. My first book, Elantris, was published in some thirteen languages, earned me a Campbell nomination, and got starred reviews in Publisher’s Weekly and the Library Journal. My second book, Mistborn, is in stores right now.

 Warbreaker is something of an experiment for me. At this point in my career, I’ve finished work on the books I need to provide for my Tor contract. My biggest problem as a new writer is not selling my work--it’s getting people to read it! People are, understandably, hesitant to take a chance on a new writer.

 So, for a long time, I’ve wanted to be able to provide a novel free for download on my website. The philosophy is that if people like this novel, they’ll seek out copies of my other books and buy them! However, I didn’t want to simply throw up one of my old, unpublished novels as the free download, since those would be a poor representation of my current style and abilities.

 So, in June of 2006, I began work on a stand-alone epic fantasy. Tor Books gave me a thumbs up, saying that they would still be happy to publish it in hardback once the Mistborn Trilogy was done. They have the same belief that I do: At this point in my career, the more people who read my books--even for free--the better. So, with my editor’s support, I began posting chapters of Warbreaker on my website as I finished them.

 The hope was to let readers collaborate a little bit on the book, offering feedback as the novel progressed. It was a risky thing to do, since it allowed some rather unpolished drafts of the novel to be read by the public. People might--potentially--judge my entire body of work based on something that was far from finished. However, I felt that the opportunity to connect directly with readers, letting them see a book progress from start to finish, was worth the risk.

 And that risk isn’t gone yet! This draft you’re reading is only the second draft of the book. Be warned that there are still going to be a lot of typos and problems in the novel! The second draft fixed some of the larger inconsistencies, but names sometimes still vary a bit, and there are some large-scale pacing problems. My intent in future drafts is to trim a bit of the language fat, speeding the novel up. I also intend to make some revisions to some plot points.

 Normally, my books go through around ten drafts before they hit bookstores! So, consider yourself warned.

 That said, please enjoy the book! If you feel like making comments on it, please do so! Also, if you do enjoy reading this, please consider tossing a few bucks my way by picking up copies of Elantris or Mistborn. The best thing you can do to make sure you get more books by Brandon Sanderson is to make sure I can feed my family!

My website: www.brandonsanderson.com

 (Find my blog here, as well as sample chapters from my other books.)

My forums: http://www.timewastersguide.com/boards/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=brandon

 (Give feedback to Warbreaker here!)

Brandon Sanderson,

November, 2006

Warbreaker

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Warbreaker

Prologue

 Why, Vasher thought, do so many things begin with me getting thrown into prison?

 The guardsmen laughed to one another outside, slamming the cell door shut with a clang. Vasher stood up and dusted himself off, rolling his shoulder and wincing slightly at the pain. He glanced about. While the bottom half of his cell door was made of solid wood, the top half was barred, and he could easily see the three men as they opened his pack and began rifling through his possessions.

 One of the guardsmen noticed him. He was an oversized beast of a man with a shaved head and a dirtied uniform that just barely showed the bright yellow and blue colorings of the T’Telir city guard.

 Bright colors, Vasher thought. I’ll have to get used to those again. In any other nation, the vibrant blues and yellows would have been ridiculous on soldiers. This, however, was Hallandren: land of Returned Gods, Lifeless servants, BioChromatic research, and--of course--color.

 The large guard sauntered forward, walking toward the cell, leaving his friends to their fun with Vasher’s pack. “They say you’re pretty tough,” the man said, sizing up Vasher.

 Vasher did not respond.

 “The bartender says you beat down some twenty men in the brawl.” The guard rubbed his chin. “You don’t look that tough to me.”

 Vasher turned away.

 The guard snorted. “Either way, you should have known better than to strike a priest. The others, they’ll spend a night locked up. You, though--you’ll hang. Colorless fool.”

 Vasher turned away from the guardsman, looking over his cell. It was functional, if modestly unoriginal. Only a thin slit in the top let in light, the stone walls dripped with water and lichen, and a pile of dirty straw decomposed in the corner. Vasher was the only one in it.

 “You ignoring me?” the guard asked, stepping closer to the bars. As he did so, the colors of his uniform brightened just slightly, like he’d stepped into a stronger light. The change was slight. Vasher didn’t have much BioChromatic Breath remaining.

 The guard didn’t notice the change in color--just like he hadn’t noticed back in the bar, when he and his buddies had picked Vasher up off the floor and thrown him in their cart. He’d likely soon wish that he’d been more observant.

 “Here, now,” one of the men said from behind. “What’s this?” The two were still searching through Vasher’s possessions--doing so right outside his cell, as if to purposely provoke him. Vasher had always found it odd that the men who patrolled dungeons tended to be as bad, or worse, than the men they guarded. Perhaps that was intentional. Society didn’t seem to care if such men were outside the cells or in them--just as long as both groups were kept away from more honest men.

 Assuming that such a thing existed.

 A guard pulled a long object--wrapped in white linen--free from Vasher’s pack. The man frowned at the object, then unwrapped it, revealing a large, thin-bladed sword in a silver sheath. The hilt was pure black.

 The guard whistled quietly. “Who do you suppose he stole this from?”

 Vasher remained quiet.

 The lead guard eyed Vasher again, frowning. He was likely wondering if Vasher might be some kind of nobleman. Though such things didn’t really exist in Hallandren, many neighboring kingdoms had their lords and ladies.

 Yet, what kind of lord would wear a drab brown cloak, ripped in several places? What kind of lord would sport bruises from a bar fight, a half-grown beard, and boots worn from years of walking? Eventually, the guard turned away, apparently convinced that Vasher was no lord.

 He was right. And he was wrong.

 “Let me see that,” the lead guard said, taking the sword from the other two. He grunted, frowning, obviously surprised by how heavy it was. The guard turned it about, noting the clasp that tied sheath to hilt, keeping the blade from being drawn. He undid the clasp.

 The colors in the room deepened slightly. They didn’t grow brighter--not like the guard’s vest had when he approached Vasher. Instead, they stronger, yet darker at the same time. Reds became maroon. The yellows hardened to gold. Blue approached navy.

 “Be careful, friend,” Vasher said quietly, “that sword can be dangerous.”

 The guard looked up. All was still for a brief moment. Then, the guard snorted. He nodded to the others and walked away from Vasher’s cell, still carrying the sword. The other two followed, bearing Vasher’s pack. All three entered the guard room at the end of the hallway.

 The door thumped shut.

 Vasher immediately began to move--he didn’t have much time. He knelt beside the patch of straw, picking through it and pulling out a handful of large, sturdy lengths. He pulled threads from his cloak--it was beginning to get quite frayed at the bottom--and tied the straw into the shape of a small person, perhaps three inches high. He plucked off one of his eyebrows, set it against the straw figure’s head, then reached into his boot and pulled out a brilliant red scarf.

 Vasher paused for a moment, looking down at the little straw person. Then, he Breathed.

 The Breath flowed from Vasher, puffing into the air, translucent yet radiant, like the color of oil on water in the sun. Vasher felt it flow out--the BioChromatic Breath, scholars called it.

 Vasher felt poor in BioChroma. He barely had enough to reach the First Heightening, which meant he had somewhere around a hundred Breaths. Yet, that was quite a bit more than most people ever had. One person, one Breath. That was the way it usually went.

 He knew he should feel fortunate to have what he did. Still, Awakening was expensive. Even Awakening a small figure made from organic material--including a piece of his own body as a focus--drained away some half of his Breaths.

 Breaths that had been taken from other people, leaving them without. It wouldn’t kill them, just. . .change them. Vasher didn’t know who they were; he hadn’t gathered these Breaths himself. They had been given to him. But, of course, that was the way it was always supposed to work. One could not take BioChroma by force.

 The little straw figure jerked, sucking in the Breath. In Vasher’s hand, the brilliant red scarf faded to grey, the color draining away. Vasher leaned down, completing the final step of the process as he gave the Command.

 “Fetch keys,” he said.

 The straw figure stood, Awakened, and raised its single eyebrow toward Vasher.

 Vasher pointed toward the guard room. From it, he heard sudden shouts of surprise.

 Not much time at all, he thought.

 The straw person ran along the floor, then jumped up, vaulting through the bars of Vasher’s’ cell. Vasher didn’t watch it go. Instead, he pulled off his cloak, then set it on the floor. Arranged as it was, it was the perfect shape of a person. It was marked with rips that matched the scars on Vasher’s body, and it had a hood cut with holes to match Vasher’s eyes. Such things were not necessary, but the closer an object was to human shape and form, the fewer Breaths it took to Awaken.

 Vasher leaned down, trying not to think of the days when he’d had enough Breaths to Awaken without regard for shape or focus. That had been a different time. He pulled a tuft of hair from his head, then sprinkled it across the hood of the cloak.

 Once again, he Breathed.

 It took the rest of his Breath. With it gone--the cloak trembling, the scarf losing the rest of its color--Vasher felt. . .dimmer. Colors weren’t as bright. He couldn’t feel the bustling people moving about in the city above, a connection he often took for granted. It was the awareness all men had for other people--that thing which told you, in the drowsiness of sleep, when someone entered the room. In Vasher, with his Breaths, it had been magnified a hundred times over.

 And now it was gone from him. Sucked into the cloak and the straw person, giving them power.

 The cloak jerked, moving. Vasher leaned down. “Protect me,” he Commanded, and the cloak grew still. He stood, throwing it on as the straw figure returned to his window. It carried, as he had hoped, a large ring of keys.

 The figure’s straw feet were stained red. The crimson blood seemed so dull to Vasher.

 He took the keys. “Thank you,” he said. He always thanked them. He didn’t really know why, particularly since the next thing he did was reach up to touch the Awakened creature on the chest.

 “Your Breath to mine,” he commanded. The straw person immediately fell backward off the door--life draining from it--and Vasher got his Breath back. The familiar sense of awareness returned, the knowledge of connectedness, of fitting. He could only take the Breath back because he’d Awakened this creature himself--indeed, Awakenings of that sort were rarely permanent. He used his Breath like a reservoir, doling it out as needed, then recovering it.

 Compared to what he had once held, fifty Breaths were a laughably small number. However, when compared to nothing, it seemed nearly infinite. He shivered slightly in satisfaction.

 The yells from the guard room died out. The dungeon fell still. He had to keep moving.

 He reached through the bars, using the keys to unlock his cell. He pushed the thick door open, rushing out into the hallway, leaving the straw figure discarded on the ground. He didn’t move toward the entrance to the dungeons, however. Instead, he turned south, penetrating into their depths.

 This was the most uncertain part of his plan. Finding a tavern that was occasionally frequented by priests of the Iridescent Tones had been easy enough. Getting into a bar fight, then ending it by striking one of those same priests, had been equally simple. Hallandrens took their religious figures very seriously--Vasher’s actions had earned him not the usual imprisonment in a local jail, but a trip to the God King’s dungeons themselves.

 And, knowing what kind of men tended to guard such dungeons, he’d had a pretty good idea that they would try to draw Nightblood. That had given him the distraction he’d needed to get the keys.

 But now came the uncertain part.

 Vasher stopped, Awakened cloak rustling. Cells extended to either side of him in the dim light, lining the hallway. He’d stopped beside one in particular, however. It was easy to spot, for around it a patch of stone two cells wide had been drained of color, leaving the walls grey and dull, like the wooden door of the cell itself.

 It was a place to imprison an Awakener. No color meant no Awakening. Vasher stepped up to the door, looking through the bars toward the figure inside.

 The man hung from the ceiling, naked and chained. And his color was vibrant to Vasher’s eyes, the color of his skin pure, his ragged clothing deep and brown.

 The man was gagged. Another precaution. In order to Awaken, the man would need three things: Breath, color, and a command. A man who could not speak clearly could bring nothing to life.

 The Harmonics and the Hues, some called it. The Iridescent tones. The relationship between color and sound. A Command had to be spoken to give an object life--any stuttering, any mispronunciation, would invalidate the Awakening, leaving the Breath drawn out, but the object unable to act. The Commands had to be delivered clearly and firmly, in the Awakener’s own native language.

 Vasher used the prison keys to unlock the cell door, then stepped inside. The aura of color this man gave off was a manifestation of the many Breaths he held. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Anyone would be able to notice an aura that strong, though it was much easier for someone who had reached the First Heightening.

 The prisoner swung in his bonds, eying Vasher with a bruised face that seemed to belie the brilliant color of his aura. Vasher had seen auras much brighter--he had seen men with so much BioChroma that they made colors seem to shine with their radiance. The Returned, known as gods here in Hallandren, had that effect.

 Still, this man’s level of BioChroma was impressive. He had far more than Vasher did. To regular men, the only noticeable indication of Vasher’s Breath would be the very slight increase in the vibrancy of colors around him. It was so small that almost everyone missed it.

 The man continued to study Vasher, gagged lips bleeding slightly from lack of water. Vasher paused only briefly, then reached up and pulled the gag free.

 “You,” the prisoner whispered, coughing slightly and licking his lips, manacled hands clanking. “Are you here to free me?”

 “No, Pahn,” Vasher said quietly. “I’m here to kill you.”

 Pahn snorted. The man’s captivity obviously hadn’t been easy on him--when Vasher had last seen Pahn, he’d been plump. Now, judging by the emaciated body and cracked lips, he’d been without food and water for some time. In addition, the cuts and burn marks on his face were fresh. They, along with a scalp bearing patches of hair that had been torn free, and the haunted look in Pahn’s bag-rimmed eyes bespoke a solemn truth.

 Breath could only be transferred by willful, intentional Command. That Command could, however, be. . .encouraged.

 “So,” Pahn croaked, “you judge me, just like everyone else.”

 “Your crimes are not my concern. I just want your Breath.”

 “You and the entire Hallandren court.”

 “Yes,” Vasher said. “But you’re not going to give it to one of the Returned. You’re going to give it to me. In exchange for killing you.”

 “Doesn’t seem like much of a trade.” There was a hardness--a void of emotion--in Pahn that Vasher had not seen the last time they had parted, years before.

 Odd, Vasher thought, that I should finally, after all of this time, find something in the man that I can identify with.

 Vasher stepped forward, but kept a wary distance from Pahn. Now that the man’s voice was free, he could--theoretically--Command. However, he had nothing of color to use in Awakening, and the only thing he was touching was the chains. It would take more Breath than even Pahn possessed to Awaken that much metal. It had never been alive, and it was far from the form of a man. Even during the height of his power, Vasher himself had only managed to Awaken metal on a few, select occasions.

 Vasher walked around the chained man, regarding him, finding it very difficult to offer any sympathy. Pahn had earned his fate.

 Yet, the priests would not let him die while he held so much Breath--for if he died, it would be wasted. Gone. Irretrievable. The hundreds of people Pahn had forced to give him their Breath would continue to live as Drabs--or Faded Ones, they were sometimes called--but their Breath itself would be lost.

 Wasted power. Not even the government of Hallandren, who normally had such strict laws about the buying and passing of Breath, could let such a wealth die with a prisoner. They wanted it badly enough to forestall the execution of even a high-profile criminal like Pahn. In retrospect, they would probably curse themselves for not leaving him better guarded.

 But, then, Vasher had been waiting two years for an opportunity like this one.

 “Well?” Pahn asked roughly.

 “Give me the Breath, Pahn,” Vasher said quietly, stepping forward.

 Pahn snorted at the threatening move. “I doubt you have the skill of the God King’s torturers, Vasher--and I’ve withstood them for two weeks now.”

 “You’d be surprised. But that doesn’t matter. You are going to give me your Breath. You’re going to do it because you’re an intelligent man, and right now, you’re coming to realize that you really only have two choices. You can give the Breath to me, or you can give it to your enemies.”

 Pahn grew silent, hanging by his wrists, rotating slowly.

 “You don’t have much time to consider,” Vasher said. “Any moment now, someone is going to discover the dead guards outside. Then the alarm will be raised. I’ll leave you, and you will be tortured again, and you will break eventually. And then, all the power you’ve gathered will go to the very people you vowed to destroy.”

 Pahn swung quietly for a moment. Then, he looked up at Vasher. “That. . .thing you bear. It’s here, in the city?”

 Vasher nodded.

 “The screams I heard earlier? It caused them?”

 Vasher nodded again.

 “How long will you be in T’Telir?”

 “For a time. A year, perhaps.”

 Pahn grew quiet. “It’s yours,” he finally whispered.

 Vasher reached over, touching his hand to Pahn’s forehead--careful not to let any part of his clothing touch the man’s skin, lest Pahn draw forth it’s color for Awakening.

 Pahn didn’t move. He looked numb. Then, just as Vasher began to worry that the prisoner had changed his mind, Pahn Breathed.

 The color drained from him. The beautiful Iridescence, the aura that had made him look majestic despite his wounds and chains. It flowed from his mouth, hanging in the air, shimmering like mist. Vasher drew it in, closing his eyes.

 “My life to yours,” Pahn Commanded, a hint of despair in his voice. “My Breath become yours.”

 The Breath flooded into Vasher, and colors deepened drastically to his eyes. His brown cloak became the strongest, most amazing hue that Vasher could imagine. Pahn’s skin became sharply distinct, bright despite his captivity, its light tan surface marked by deep black hairs, blue bruises, and sharp red lines of blood.

 It had been years since Vasher had felt such. . .life. He gasped, falling to his knees as it overwhelmed him, and he had to drop a hand to the stone floor to keep himself from toppling over.

 How did I live without this? he thought.

 Everything seemed more real to him. His senses hadn’t become more keen--he couldn’t see further or hear things more distant--yet, he felt more alert. More aware of the beauty of sensation. When he touched the stone floor, he marveled at its roughness. It was so wonderful. And the sound of wind passing through the thin dungeon window up above. Had it always been that melodic? How could he not have noticed?

 “Keep your part of the bargain,” Phan said, and Vasher noted the tones in his voice, the beauty of each one, how close they were to harmonics. Perfect pitch. A gift for anyone who reached the Second Heightening. It would be good to have that again.

 Vasher stood, then pulled out the colorless scarf he had used earlier. He tossed it over Pahn’s shoulder, letting it hang down. Then, Vasher Breathed. He didn’t bother with making the object look like a person’s body, or have a piece of flesh attached to it for a focus. He just Breathed, drawing the color from his own shirt.

 Vasher met Pahn’s resigned eyes.

 “Strangle things,” Vasher Commanded, fingers touching the quivering scarf.

 It twisted immediately, drawing away many of Vasher’s Breaths, but even that number was only a tiny bit to Vasher now. The scarf quickly wrapped around Pahn’s neck, tightening, choking him. Pahn didn’t struggle or gasp, he simply bore the execution, watching Vasher with hatred until his eyes bulged and he died.

 Hatred. Vasher had known enough of that in his time. Fortunately, this day he had been the lesser of two loathings. He quietly reached up and recovered his Breath from the scarf, then left Pahn dangling in his prison.

 Vasher passed quietly though the prison, marveling at the color of the woods and even the stones. After a few moments of walking, he noticed a new color in the hallway. Red.

 He stepped around the pool of blood which was seeping down the inclined dungeon floor, then moved into the guard room. The three men he’d seen earlier--as well as two others--lay dead. One of them sat in a chair. Nightblood, still mostly sheathed, had been rammed through the man’s chest. About an inch of a dark black blade was visible beneath the silver sheath.

 Vasher reached to the sword’s hilt, then carefully slid the weapon fully back into is sheath. He did up the clasp.

 I did very well today, a voice said in his mind.

 Vasher didn’t respond to the sword.

 I killed them all, Nightblood continued. And, they only managed to draw me out a tiny bit. Aren’t you proud of me?

 Vasher picked up the weapon, accustomed to its unusual weight, and carried it in one hand. Then, he recovered his pack and slung it over his shoulder.

 I knew you’d be impressed, Nightblood said, sounding satisfied. Vasher said nothing. He simply slipped out of the dungeons, entering into the city itself.

Warbreaker

Chapter One

 There were great advantages to being unimportant.

 True, by many people’s standards, Siri couldn’t really be called ‘unimportant.’ She was, after all, the daughter of a king.

 And yet, her father had four children, and Siri--at seventeen years of age--was the youngest. Fafen, the daughter just older than Siri, had done the family duty and become a monk. Above Fafen was Ridger, the eldest son. He would inherit the throne.

 And then, there was Vivenna. Siri sighed as she walked down the path back to the city. Vivenna, the firstborn, was. . .well. . .Vivenna. Beautiful, poised, perfect in most every way. It was a good thing, too, considering the fact that she was engaged to marry a god.

 Either way, Siri--as fourth child--was redundant. Vivenna and Ridger had to focus on their studies; Fafen had to do her work in the pastures and homes, helping those who needed an extra hand. Siri, however, could get away with being unimportant.

 That meant she could disappear into the wilderness for hours at a time.

 People would notice, of course--and she would get into trouble, particularly when her father found out. Yet, even he would have to admit that her disappearance hadn’t cause much concern, or even really much of an inconvenience to anyone. The city got along just fine without Siri--in fact, it tended to do a little better when she wasn’t around.

 Unimportance. To another, it might have been offensive. To Siri, however, it was an advantage.

 She smiled, walking into the city proper. She drew stares. She couldn’t really help that. Bevalis was technically the capitol of the Idris Highlands. However, it wasn’t really that big, and everyone knew her by name. Judging by the stories Siri had heard from passing ramblemen, her home city was hardly even a village when compared to the massive metropolises in other kingdoms.

 Yet, she liked it the way it was. Even with its muddy streets, its thatched cottages with boring--yet sturdy--stone walls. A grand city from Xaka, Hudres, or even terrible Hallandren might have exotic people, but it would never know cool highland winds like the one that rustled Siri’s dress.

 A big city would be busy, but it wouldn’t be the kind of busy that involved women chasing runaway geese, men pulling donkeys laden with spring seed, or children leading sheep directly through the center of the village on their way to pasture. Big cities would be busy with faceless shouting, jostling crowds, and haughty noblemen. Not really Siri’s way--she generally found even Bevalis to be a bit crowded for her.

 Still, she thought, imagining one of those massive, noisy cities, I’ll bet they have more colors. That’s something I’d like to see.

 Her hair wouldn’t stand out so much there. The long locks had gone blonde with joy while she’d been out in the fields, like usual. She concentrated, trying to rein it in, but she was only able to bring the color to a dull brown. And, as soon as she stopped focusing, it just went back to the way it had been before. She’d never been very good at controlling it. Not like Vivenna.

 She continued on her way, wearing her utilitarian grey one-piece dress. As she walked, she caught sight of a small group of figures trailing her. She smiled, pretending to ignore the children until one of them was brave enough to run forward and tug on her dress.

 She smiled, turning toward them. They regarded her with solemn faces. Idris children were trained even at this age to avoid shameful outbursts of emotion. There was nothing wrong with feelings, the Austrin teachings went, but drawing attention to yourself with them--that was arrogance.

 Siri had never been very devout. It wasn’t her fault, she reasoned, if Austre had made her with a rather distinct inability to obey.

 The children waited patiently until Siri reached into her apron and pulled out a couple of brightly colored flowers. The children’s eyes opened wide, taking in the vibrant colors. Three of the flowers were blue, another a vibrant yellow. Revealing them highlighted the city’s determined drabness. There wasn’t a drop of color in sight, other than what one could find on the skin and eyes of the people. Stones had been whitewashed. Clothing bleached grey or tan. But, then, that only made the flowers that much more beautiful by comparison.

 Finally the girl who had tugged her skirt took the flowers in one hand and dashed away with them, the other children following behind. Siri watched them go, then caught a look of disproval in the eyes of several passing herdsmen. However, none of them confronted her.

 Being a princess--even an unimportant one--did have its perks.

 The palace was a flat, single-story building with a large courtyard. Siri avoided the crowds at the front, rounding to the back and going in the kitchen entrance. Mab, the kitchen mistress, stopped her singing as the door opened. She glanced away from her group of boiling pots, raising an eyebrow as she recognized Siri.

 “Your father’s been looking for you, child,” Mab said, turning back to her cooking, humming as she attacked a pile of onions.

 Siri smiled. “I suspect that he has, Mab.” She walked over and sniffed at a pot, which bore the calm scent of washed and boiling potatoes.

 “Went to the hills again, didn’t you?” Mab asked.

 Siri smiled, then pulled out another of the bright yellow flowers, spinning it between two fingers.

 Mab rolled her eyes. “And, been corrupting the city youth again, I suspect. Your father will have words with you about that.”

 “I like words,” Siri said. “And I always learn a few new ones when father gets angry. I shouldn’t neglect my education, now should I?”

 Mab snorted, dicing some pickled tomatoes into the onions.

 “Honestly, though, Mab,” Siri said, twirling the flower, feeling her hair shade a little bit red with curiosity. “I just don’t see what the problem is. Austre made the flowers, right? He put the colors on them, so they can’t be evil. I mean, we call him God of Colors, for heaven’s sake.”

 “Flowers ain’t evil,” Mab said, adding something that looked like grass to her concoction. “They’re quite good, assuming they’re left to grow where Austre put them. It’s when we use his things to make ourselves stand out from others that we get arrogant. We shouldn’t use Austre’s beauty to make ourselves more important.”

 “A flower doesn’t make me look more important.”

 “Oh?” Mab asked, adding the grass, tomatoes, and onions to one of her boiling posts. She banged the side of the pot with the flat of her knife, listening, then nodded to herself and began fishing below for more vegetables.

 “You tell me, child,” Mab said, voice muffled from beneath the counter. “You really mean to say that walking through the city with a flower like that didn’t draw attention to yourself?”

 “That’s only because the city is so drab,” Siri said. “If there were a bit of color around, nobody would notice a flower.”

 Mab reappeared, hefting a box filled with various roots and tubers. “The fact remains,” she said, picking up her knife with the express purpose of wagging it toward Siri. “You shouldn’t draw attention to yourself so, child. Even if you are a princess. Prancing around with flowers like that. They make you stand out.”

 Siri sighed. “Fine, then,” she said, tossing the flower into the stew pot. “Now we can all stand out together.”

 Mab paused, then rolled her eyes, chopping a root. “I assume that was a vanavel flower?”

 “Of course,” Siri said, sniffing at the steaming pot. “I know better than to ruin a good stew. Regardless, I still think we could stand to have a little more color around the city.”

 “Is that so? You’d have us decorate the place like some Hallandren? Maybe we should start inviting Awakeners into the city too? How’d you like that? Some devil sucking the life out of children, strangling people with their own clothing? Bringing men back from the dead, then using their Lifeless bodies for cheap labor?”

 Siri felt her hair whiten slightly with anxiety. Stop that! she thought. The hair seemed to have a mind of its own, responding to gut feelings.

 Mab, however, took the hair change as a sign that she’d won. “Here,” she said, pulling out another knife, only slightly less long than the first. “Go make yourself useful. There’s roots that need choppin.”

 “Shouldn’t I report to my father?” Siri said, grabbing a vanavel root and beginning to chop.

 “He’ll just send you back down here to help as a punishment,” Mab said, banging the pot with her knife again. She had the solemn belief that she could judge when a dish was done by the way the pot rang.

 “Good point,” Siri noted. “Austre help me if father ever discovers I like it down here.”

 “You just like being close to the food,” Mab said, fishing Siri’s flower out of the stew, then tossing it aside. “Either way, you can’t really report to him. He’s in conference with Yarda at the moment. Something about troop movements or the like.”

 Siri gave no reaction--she simply continued to chop. However, if Mab had paused in her cooking to notice Siri’s hair, she would have seen it growing yellow with excitement.

 Father’s conferences with Yarda usually last hours, she thought. Not much point in simply sitting around, waiting for him to get done. . . .

 Mab turned to get something off the table, and by the time she’d turned back, Siri had bolted for the door and run towards the royal stables.

 Bare minutes later, she’d thrown on her favorite cloak and climbed atop a horse. She galloped away from the palace, feeling an exhilarated thrill that sent her hair into a deep blonde. A nice quick ride would be a good way to round out the day.

 After all, her punishment was likely to be the same either way.

#

 King Dedelin of Idris set the letter down on his desk, then turned away. It was time to decide whether or not to send his eldest daughter to her death.

 Despite the advent of spring, his chamber was cold. Warmth was a rare thing in the Idris Highlands, coveted and enjoyed, for it lingered only briefly each summer. His chambers were stark, after Idris customs. There was a beauty to simplicity. Even a king had no right to display arrogance by ostentation.

 Dedelin stood by his window, looking out into his courtyard. The palace was small, by the world’s standards--only a single story high, with a peaked wooden roof and squat stone walls. It was large by Idris standards, and in his opinion, it bordered on flamboyant. This could be forgiven, however, for the palace was not only his home, but a meeting hall and center of operations for the entire kingdom.

 Only one other person stood in the king’s chambers with Dedelin. The king could see General Yarda out of the corner of his eye. The burly man waited, hands clasped behind his back, thick beard tied in three places.

 Dedelin glanced back at the letter. The paper was a bright reddish pink, and the garish color stood out on his desk like a drop of blood in the snow. The vibrant pink was a color one would never see in Idris, where even a dark brown was sometimes considered too flamboyant. In Hallandren, however--center of the world’s dye industry--such tasteless hues were commonplace.

 “Well?” Dedelin asked, looking over at Yarda. “Do you have any counsel for me?”

 The general shook his head. “War is coming, your majesty. I fear there is little we can do to stop it. Hallandren considers us part of its territory, and our passes to the north are too tempting a prospect. They will attack.”

 “Then I shouldn’t send her,” Dedelin said, looking back out his window. The courtyard bustled with people in furs and cloaks. His palace was also a storage area, marketplace, and working ground, useable by any citizen of the kingdom with proper documentation.

 “We can’t stop the war, your majesty. But. . .we can slow it.”

 Dedelin turned back.

 Yarda stepped forward, speaking softly. “This is not a good time for us. Our troops still haven’t recovered from that Vendis raiding incident last fall, and with the fires in the granary this winter. . . .” Yarda shook his head. “We can’t afford to get into a defensive war in the summer. The only advantages we have against the Hallandren are the snows. We can’t let this conflict happen on their terms. If we do, we are dead.”

 Dedelin stood quietly. The words all made sense.

 But. . .to send them Vivenna? His heart twisted at the thought. His favored daughter, the woman he would--in a perfect world--have left to rule when he died. It seemed such a tragedy. He had to struggle to keep his hair under control as it started to bleach in reaction to his emotion.

 Yarda joined him beside the window, looking out, leaning one elbow against the side of the frame. He was a harsh man born of harsh winters. But, he was also as good a man as Dedelin had ever known--a piece of the king had secretly wished to marry Vivenna to the general’s own son.

 And yet, that was foolishness. Dedelin had always known this day would come. He’d crafted the treaty himself. “If we send her, Yarda,” Dedelin said softly, “we send her to her death.”

 The general continued to stare out the window. When war did come, Vivenna would be trapped in the palace of their enemies, married to their twisted God King. The Hallandren needed a daughter of the royal blood to reintroduce the traditional line into their monarchy. It was something the depraved and vainglorious people of the lowlands had long coveted, and only that specific clause in the treaty had saved Idris from their armies twenty years before.

 That treaty had been the first official act of Dedalin’s rein, negotiated furiously following his father’s assassination. Dedalin’s own weakness still frustrated him. How quickly he’d bowed before the whims of his enemies, the very ones who had killed his father. And yet, the act had protected Idris. An Idris monarch would do anything for his people.

 That was one main difference between the Idris and the Hallandren.

 “Maybe they won’t kill her,” Yarda finally said.

 Dedelin shook his head. “You know better than that. The first thing they’ll do when war comes is use her against me. When I refuse to surrender, they’ll send her head as a warning. This is the Hallandren we’re talking about. They invite Awakeners into their palaces, for heaven’s sake!”

 Yarda fell silent. Finally, he shook his head again. “Reports say that they keep a standing army of some forty thousand Lifeless.”

 Lord God of the Colors, Dedelin thought.

 “If that army attacks this summer, it will be a slaughter,” Yarda continued. “Sending Vivenna is a bad plan, but it’s also our only plan. Even if it buys us just a few more months, it will be a blessed reprieve. With a little more time, I should be able to bring the Natiees nomads to our cause, not to mention the dissidents in Hallandren itself. You know that their leader has been captured. Following his execution, I’d say that his people will be far more likely to listen to our offers.”

 Dedelin glanced back at the letter. Its language was simple. Vivenna’s twenty-second birthday had come, and the terms of the treaty stipulated that Dedelin could wait no longer. The Hallandren had every right to demand that their bride be sent.

 It was just that, thinking of Vivenna in the God King’s arms. . . . She would be forced to bear that creature’s child, a stillborn monster who would become the next Returned God of the Hallandren.

 There is another way, a piece of his mind whispered.

 A knock came at his door. Both he and Yarda turned, and Dedelin called for the visitor to enter. The door opened respectfully; he should have been able to guess who it would be.

 “Vivenna,” Dedelin said quietly.

 She stood in a quiet grey dress, looking so young to him still. Yet, she was the perfect image of an Idris woman--hair kept in a neatly tied knot, no ostentatious makeup to draw attention to the face. She was not timid or soft, like some noblewoman from the eastern kingdoms. She was just composed. Composed, simple, hard, and capable. The Idris way.

 “You have been in here for several hours, father,” Vivenna said, bowing her head respectfully to Yarda. “The servants speak of a colorful envelope carried in the general’s fingers when he entered. I believe I know what this is about.”

 Dedelin met her eyes, then nodded, waving her into the room to seat herself. She closed the door, then took one of the wooden chairs from the side of the room. Yarda remained standing, after the masculine fashion.

 Vivenna eyed the letter sitting on the desk, but did not express emotion. She was calm, her hair controlled and kept to a respectful black. She was twice as devout as Dedelin himself, and--unlike her sister--she never drew attention to herself with fits of emotion.

 “I assume that I should prepare myself for departure, then,” Vivenna said quietly, hands in her lap.

 Dedelin opened his mouth, but could find no objection. He glanced at Yarda, who just shook his head, looking down.

 “I have prepared my entire life for this, father,” Vivenna said. “I am ready. Siri, however, will not take this well. She returned to the palace an hour ago, but quickly left again for a ride. I should depart the city before she gets back, if possible. That will avoid any potential. . .scene she might make.”

 “Too late,” Yarda said, grimacing and nodding toward the window. Just outside, people scattered in the courtyard as a figure galloped through the gates. She wore a deep brown cloak that bordered on being too colorful, and she--of course--had her hair down. Dedelin frowned deeply. The hair was yellow.

 Dedelin felt his rage and frustration growing. Only Siri could make him lose control, and--as if in ironic counterpoint to his frustration with her--his emotions got the better of him. He felt his hair change. To those watching, a few locks of hair on his head would have bled their blackness away, turning red instead.

 It was the identifying mark of the royal family--the line that had fled to the Idris Highlands at the climax of the Manywar. Others could hide their emotions. The royals, however, manifest their emotions in the color of the hair on their heads.

 Vivenna watched him, pristine as always, and her poise gave him strength as he brought his hair back under control, straightening it and making it black again. It took more willpower than any common man could understand to keep the treasonous royal locks under control. Even Dedelin wasn’t sure how Vivenna managed it so well.

 Poor girl never even had a childhood, he thought, finally under control again. From birth, Vivenna’s life had been pointed toward this single event.

 He looked at her, and had to steel himself to keep his affection from showing in his hair. His firstborn child, the girl who had always seemed like a piece of himself. The girl who had always made him proud; the woman who had already earned the love and respect of her people. In his mind’s eye he saw the queen she could be come, stronger even than he. Someone who could guide them through the dark days ahead.

 But only if she survived that long.

 “I will go prepare myself for the trip,” Vivenna said, rising.

 “No,” Dedelin found himself saying.

 Yarda and Vivenna both turned, frowning.

 “Father,” Vivenna said. “If we break this treaty, it will mean war. I am prepared to sacrifice for our people. You taught me that.”

 “You will not go,” Dedelin said firmly, turning back toward the window. Outside, Siri was laughing with one of the stable boys as he took her horse. He could hear her outburst even from a distance, and could easily see that her hair had turned a flame-colored red.

 He felt his own hair bleeding slightly white with concern.

 Lord God of Colors, forgive me, he thought. But I cannot do it. I cannot send my firstborn to die.

 What a terrible choice for a father to make. But. . .anything for my kingdom. Or, at least, almost anything.

 Dedelin turned back toward the room. “Vivenna, you will not go to wed the tyrant god of our enemies. I’m sending your sister in your place.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Two

 Siri sat, stunned, as her homeland trailed away behind her.

 Two days had passed, and she still couldn’t understand what was happening. Why had she been sent? This was supposed to be Vivenna’s marriage. Everybody understood that. They’d had a celebration on the day of Vivenna’s birth. The king had put her into lessons from the day she could walk, training her in the ways of court life and politics.

 Fafen, the second daughter, had taken some of the lessons, learning what she’d need in case Vivenna died before the day of the wedding. But not Siri. She’d been redundant. Unimportant. Just the way she liked it.

 No more.

 She glanced out the window. Her father had sent the kingdom’s nicest carriage to bear her southward, along with an honor guard of some ten soldiers. That, mixed with a steward and several serving boys, made for a procession as grand as Siri had ever seen. It bordered on ostentation, which might have thrilled her, except for the fact that she was being sent away.

 This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be, she thought. This isn’t the way any of it is supposed to happen.

 And yet, it had. Siri sat numbly, feeling the rough roadway bump beneath her. She’d much rather have just rode a horse, but that--apparently--wasn’t appropriate for a soon to be bride.

 Marred Shadow, the roan, she thought, thinking of horses in her father’s stable. And Bright Apple. Califad and Surefoot. Will I ever see them again?

 With that thought, the reality of what was happening finally poked through her numb mind. She felt her hair bleach white with fear. She wasn’t just taking Vivenna’s place. She was getting married. Leaving Idris. Being sent off to a kingdom far away, a kingdom that the people of Idris cursed with every second breath.

 She wouldn’t see her father again any time soon. She wouldn’t speak with Vivenna, or listen to the tutors, or be chided by Mab, or ride the royal horses, or go looking for flowers in the wilderness, or work in the kitchens. She’d. . . .

 What would she do? Marry a God King. The terror of Hallandren, the monster that had never drawn a living breath. In Hallandren, he could order an execution on a whim, and his power was absolute.

 I’ll be safe, though, won’t I? she thought. I’ll be his wife.

 Wife.

 Oh Austre, God of Colors. . . . She thought with a sudden feeling of sickness. She curled up with her legs against her chest--her hair growing so white that it seemed to shine--and lay down on the seat of the carriage, unable to do a thing as it continued its inevitable path to the south.

#

 “I think that you should reconsider your decision, Father,” Vivenna said calmly, sitting--as she’d been trained--with hands in her lap.

 “I’ve considered and reconsidered, Vivenna,” her father said, waving his hand. “My mind is made up.”

 “But, Siri is not suited to this task.”

 “She’ll do fine,” her father said, looking through some papers on his desk. “All she really needs to do is have a baby. I’m fairly certain she’s ‘suited’ to that task.”

 But, what then of my training? Vivenna thought. Twenty-two years of preparation? What was that, if the only point in being sent was to provide a convenient womb?

 She kept her hair black, her voice solemn, her face calm. “Siri must be very distraught,” she said. “I do not know if she’s emotionally capable of dealing with this experience.”

 Her father looked up, hair fading a bit red--the black bleeding away like paint running off a canvas. It showed his annoyance.

 He’s more distraught by her departure than he’s willing to admit, Vivenna thought.

 “I have a lot of work to do, Vivenna,” her father said, working--with obvious effort--to turn his hair black again. “Why don’t you go have a pleasant stroll, and we’ll discuss this later?”

 Later, after Siri had traveled even further away. Yet, Vivenna rose. She was obedient; it was the way she had been trained. That was one of the things that had always separated her from Siri.

 She left her father’s study, closing the door behind her, and entered the wooden palace hallway. She walked calmly through the passages, pretending that she didn’t see the stares or hear the whispers. She made her way to her room--a small, unadorned corner of the palace--and sat down on her bed, hands in her lap.

 What, in the blessed name of Austre was going on? Her father’s move made no sense. It had always been Vivenna’s duty to prepare for her marriage to Susebron, the God King. Not Siri’s, not Fafen’s. Vivenna’s.

 Had she done something wrong, perhaps? Failed some hidden test of capability during her lessons? Offended her father somehow?

 She’d always done what she was supposed to. She’d listened, prepared, learned, and practiced. Everyone said that she’d done it perfectly. She’d done everything right. Why, then, was she being punished so?

 She could come up with no good reason. She could simply sit and fret, hands in her lap, and face the awful truth. Her purpose in life had been stolen and given to another. She was redundant now. Useless.

 Unimportant.

#

 “What was he thinking!” Siri snapped, hanging half out the window of her carriage as it bounced along.

 A young soldier marched beside the vehicle, looking uncomfortable in the afternoon light.

 “I mean really,” Siri said. “Sending me to be married to the Hallandren king. That’s silly, isn’t it? I mean, surely you’ve heard about the kinds of things I do. Wandering off when nobody’s looking. Ignoring my lessons. I throw angry fits, for Color’s sake--and not just when I’ve been exiled to some Lifeless monster’s bed!”

 The guard glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise gave no reaction. Siri didn’t really care--she simply hung precariously from the window of her carriage, feeling the wind play with her hair--long, red, straight--stoking her anger. Fury kept her from weeping, something that had taken far too much of her time lately.

 The green spring hills of the Idris highlands had slowly faded away as the days had passed, bearing Siri closer and closer to her terrible destination. In fact, they were probably in Hallandren already--the border between the two kingdoms was rather vague, which wasn’t surprising, considering the fact that they’d been one nation up until the Manywar.

 She eyed the poor guard--whose only way of dealing with a raving princess appeared to be ignoring her--then finally slumped back into the carriage. She shouldn’t have treated him so, she knew. But, well, she’d just been sold off like some hunk of mutton--ransomed by a document that had been written years before she’d even been born. If anyone had a right to a tantrum, it was Siri.

 Besides, it wasn’t the first time one of her tirades would have made someone uncomfortable. Maybe that’s the reason for all of this, she thought, crossing her arms on the windowsill. Maybe they just wanted to get rid of me, and this was a convenient excuse.

 But, that seemed a little far-fetched. There were easier ways to deal with Siri--sending her off to represent the country in a foreign land seemed too extreme. But, then, that really only left one other option. That her father thought she’d do a good job.

 Better than Vivenna, though? That seemed even more far-fetched. Nobody did anything better than Vivenna.

 She sighed, feeling her hair turn a pensive brown, letting herself get distracted by the passing landscape. It certainly was dramatic enough--she’d spent the last few days, when she wasn’t raving or weeping, studying it. After all, there wasn’t much else to do on the trip.

 Hallandren was in the lowlands, a place of tropical forests and strange, colorful animals. Siri had heard the descriptions from ramblemen, and even read them in the occasional book--though she hadn’t really spent that much time reading. That had been one of Vivenna’s hobbies.

 Still, she’d figured she knew what to expect. Yet, as the hills gave way to deep grasslands, and the trees finally began to sprout up, Siri had begun to realize that there was something no tome or tale could adequately describe.

 Colors.

 In the highlands, flowers grew sporadically. The patches were rare and unconnected, as if they understood how poorly they fit with Idris philosophy. Here, however, they were everywhere. Little tiny flowers grew in great blanketing swaths on the ground. Large, drooping blossoms hung from trees or stalks. Everything was colorful--even the weeds appeared to have flowers.

 She would have reached out and picked some of them, if not for the way that the soldiers regarded them with hostility.

 If I feel this anxious, she realized, they must feel more so. She wasn’t the only one who had been sent away from family, friends, and home. When would these men be allowed to return? Ever? Suddenly, she felt even more guilty for subjecting the young soldier to her outburst.

 I’ll send them back when I arrive, she thought, feeling her hair grow white as she considered the move. It would leave her alone in a city filled with Lifeless, Awakeners, and pagans. Yet, what good would ten Idris soldiers do her? Better that someone, at least, be allowed to return to the place where they belong.

#

 “One would think,” Fafen said, “that you would be happy. After all, you no longer have to marry a tyrant.”

 Vivenna plopped a berry into her basket, surveyed the bush she’d been working on, then moved on to another one instead.

 Fafen worked on a bush nearby. She wore the white robes of a monk, her hair completely shorn. Fafen was the middle sister in almost every way--midway between Siri and Vivenna in height, less proper than Vivenna, yet hardly as careless as Siri. Fafen was a bit curvier than either of them, which had earned her the eye of several young men in the village. However, the fact that they would have to become monks themselves if they wanted to marry her kept them in check.

 If Fafen noticed how popular she was, she’d never shown it. She’d made the decision to become a monk before her tenth birthday, and her father had wholeheartedly approved. Every family was, traditionally, supposed to provide one person for the monasteries. It was against the Five Visions to be selfish, even with one’s own blood.

 The two sisters continued to work, gathering berries which Fafen would later distribute to those without parents, or who suffered other hardships.

 “Yes,” Fafen said, her fingers dyed slightly red by the work. Vivenna wore gloves. That much color on her hands would be unseemly. “Yes, I think you’re taking this all wrong. Why, you act as if you want to go down and be married to that Lifeless monster.”

 “He’s not Lifeless,” Vivenna said. “Susebron is Returned, and there is a large difference.”

 Fafen cocked her head, then continued her work. “Yes, but he’s a false god, a distraction from Austre. Besides, everyone knows what a terrible creature he is.”

 “But, it was my place to go and marry him. It’s who I am, Fafen. Without it, I am nothing.”

 “Nonsense,” Fafen said. “You’ll inherit now, instead of Ridger.”

 Thereby unsettling the order of things even further, Vivenna thought with a frown. He’s always thought he would inherit. What right do I have to take that from him?

 She didn’t want to be queen. She just wanted what she’d been born, trained, and created to do.

 And yet, she let the conversation die. She’d been arguing the point for several minutes now, and it wouldn’t be polite to continue. It seemed odd to Vivenna--never before could she remember being quite so frustrated at having to be polite. Her emotions were was growing rather. . .inconvenient.

 Yet, she kept her hair black and her thoughts to herself. Fafen made good points--points that any Idrian would have made. Nobody would want to go and marry the God King. It was silly. Vivenna should be relieved that she didn’t have to go.

 And yet, she wasn’t.

 “What of Siri?” she found herself saying. “You’re happy that this happened to her?”

 Fafen looked up, then frowned a little to herself. She had a tendency to avoid thinking about things unless they were brought up to her directly. Vivenna felt a little ashamed for making such a blunt comment but, well, with Fafen, there often wasn’t any other way.

 “You do have a point,” Fafen said. “I don’t see why anyone had to be sent.”

 “The treaty,” Vivenna said. “It protects our people.”

 “Austre protects our people,” Fafen said, moving on to another bush.

 Will he protect Siri? Vivenna thought, but--of course--didn’t confront Fafen with the comment. That would certainly not be polite.

 Still, as she worked, Vivenna couldn’t take her mind off her sister.

 Siri. Poor, innocent, capricious Siri. She’d never learned to control herself, and that would get her eaten alive in the Hallandren Court of Gods. Siri wouldn’t understand the politics, the backstabbing, the false faces and lies. Vivenna, however, had been tutored all of her life, and had learned how to deal with such things.

 Siri. She would be forced to bear Susebron’s child, the next God King of Hallandren. That was not an aspect of her duty that Vivenna had looked forward to. It would have been a sacrifice. Yet, it would have been her sacrifice, given willingly.

 Siri. Sent on her own, alone, against her will. Vivenna had always watched out for the girl, tempering their father’s anger, suggesting that Siri be allowed to do as she wished. Control had to be learned on one’s own, the monks taught. It could not be forced.

 Thoughts of her sister stayed with Vivenna as they finished with their berry picking, then moved down the hillside back toward the village. Fafen, like all monks, dedicated all of her work to the good of the people. She watched flocks, harvested food, and cleaned houses for those who could not do it themselves.

 It was kind of like Vivenna had always intended to do--sacrifice herself. It had been her right. But, that right had been taken from her. Where did that leave her? She seemed to have little purpose anymore.

 And yet, there was someone who--perhaps--still needed her. Someone for whom she could sacrifice. Someone that had left a week before, teary-eyed and frightened, looking to her big sister with desperation.

 Siri. Vivenna didn’t know why the girl had been sent, but she did know the people, cultures, and society of Hallandren. And--as she followed Fafen onto the village road, passing children who paused abruptly, apparently haven mistaken Vivenna for Siri--an idea began to form in Vivenna’s head.

 And it was not, by any stretch of the imagination, polite.

Warbreaker

Chapter Three

 Only heroes Returned to life after dying, they said. Men and women who exemplified some attribute or emotion much grander, more deific, than those of regular people. In Lightsong’s case, it had been his extreme bravery that had justified him to become a God.

 Or, that’s what his priests told him.

 He sighed, unable to sleep any longer. He rolled over, feeling weak as he climbed out of bed. Visions and memories still vaguely pestered his mind, and he shook his head, trying to clear away the fog of sleep.

 The servants entered, responding wordlessly to their God’s needs. God. He was one of the lesser--he’d only Returned five years before. There were some two dozen others, many far more important--and far more politically savvy--than Lightsong. And above them all reigned Susebron, the God King of Hallandren.

 Yet, even one such as Lightsong merited a majestic palace in the Court of Gods. He slept in a room draped with silks, dyed with bright reds and yellows. His palace held dozens of different chambers, decorated and furnished according to his whims. Hundreds of servants and priests to saw to his needs--whether he wanted them seen to or not.

 All of this, he thought as he stood, because I couldn’t figure out how to die. Standing made him just a bit dizzy. It was his feastday, and it had been a week since he’d last eaten properly. He would lack strength until he was fed.

 Servants approached with brilliant red and gold robes for him to wear. As they drew within his aura, each one--skin, hair, clothing, and garments held in their hands--burst with an inner color. The hues saturated, growing far more resplendent than any dye or paint could produce. The colors responded to Lightsong’s innate BioChroma--he supposedly had enough Breath to fill thousands of people. He saw little use to it, though. He couldn’t animate objects or corpses; he was a God, not an Awakener. He couldn’t give--or even loan--his Breath away.

 Well, except once. That would, however, kill him.

 The servants continued their ministrations. Lightsong stood a good head and a half taller than anyone else in the room. He was broad of shoulders, with a muscular physique that he didn’t really deserve, considering the amount of time he spent idle.

 “Did you sleep well, your grace?” a voice asked.

 Lightsong turned as Llarimar entered, wearing the reds and golds of Lightsong’s ministry. The high priest was a tall portly man with spectacles and a calm demeanor. Hands nearly hidden by the deep robe sleeves, he carried a thick tome. Both robes and tome--which had a bright red leather cover--burst with color as they entered Lightsong’s aura.

 “Oh, I slept fantastically, Scoot,” Lightsong said, yawning. “A night full of nightmares and dreams, just like always. Terribly restful.”

 The priest raised an eyebrow. “Scoot??”

 “Yes,” Lightsong said. “I’ve decided to give you a new nickname. Scoot. Seems to fit you, the way you’re always scooting around, poking into things and such.”

 “I am honored, your grace,” Llarimar said, seating himself on a chair and giving no other reaction to the undignified nickname.

 Colors, Lightsong thought as the servants continued to tie ribbons, do up clasps, and arrange robes. Why do I try so hard to annoy the man? He’s only doing his duty.

 Llarimar opened his tome. “Shall we begin?”

 “If we must,” Lightsong said. The servants finished, each bowing in turn and retreating to the sides of the room.

 Llarimar picked up his quill. “What, then, do you remember of your dreams?”

 “Oh, the usual.” Lightsong flopped back onto one of his couches, lounging and relaxing, giving in to the day’s weakness. “You know, nothing really important.”

 Llarimar pursed his lips in displeasure. Other servants began to file in, bringing various dishes food. Mundane, human food. As a Returned, Lightsong didn’t need to eat such things--they would not give him strength, or sate his tiredness. He could still enjoy eating and tasting such foods.

 However, today was his feastday. In a short time, he would dine on something far more. . .divine. It would give him strength enough to live for another week.

 “Please try to remember the dreams, your grace,” Llarimar said in his polite, yet disapproving, way.

 Lightsong sighed, looking up at the ceiling. It was painted with a mural, of course. Three fields enclosed by stone pastures--a vision one of his predecessors had seen, or so he was told. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to focus, thinking back to his dreams.

 “I. . .was walking by a beach,” Lightsong said. “And a ship was leaving without me. I don’t know where it was going.”

 He looked up. Llarimar was writing quickly, nodding to himself, likely finding all kinds of symbolism in the memory. “Colors?” the priest asked.

 “The ship had a red sail,” Lightsong said. “The sand was brown, of course, and the trees green. For some reason, I think the ocean water was red, like the ship.”

 Llarimar scribbled furiously--he always got excited when Lightsong remembered colors.

 Lightsong lounged back again, looking up at the ceiling and its brightly colored fields. He reached over idly, picking some cherries off a servant’s plate.

 Lightsong was a terrible God. He knew it. Nobody ever said such things to him, of course, but he was wise enough to see the truth.

 Why should he begrudge the people his memories of dreaming? Even if he found divination to be foolish, he had no real right to complain. He was one of the most fortunate people alive. Though he couldn’t remember how he had died, he had obviously been given another chance at life. He had a BioChromatic aura, a physique that any man would envy, and enough food and luxury for ten kings. Of all the people in the world, he had the least right to be difficult.

 It was just that. . .well, he was probably the only God who had ever lived who didn’t believe in his own religion.

 “Was there anything else, your grace?” Llarimar asked, looking up from his book.

 “You were there, Scoot.”

 Llarimar paused, paling just slightly. “I. . .was?”

 Lightsong nodded. “You apologized for bothering me all the time and keeping me from my debauchery. Then, you brought me a big bottle of wine and did a dance. It was really quite remarkable.”

 Llarimar regarded him with a flat stare.

 Lightsong sighed. “No, there was nothing else. Just the boat. Even that is fading.”

 Llarimar nodded, rising and shooing back the servants--though, of course, they remained in the room, hovering with their plates of food, wine, and fruit, should any of it be wanted.

 “Shall we be on with it then, your grace?” Llarimar asked.

 Lightsong sighed, then rose, feeling exhausted. A servant scuttled forward to redo one of the clasps on his robe, which had come undone as he sat.

 Lightsong fell into step beside his priest, towering a good foot over Llarimar. The furniture and doorways, however, were built to fit Lightsong’s increased size. So, it was the servants and priests who seemed out of place in the palace.

 They walked through several rooms--there were no hallways, just rich rooms, well decorated. Hallways were for servants, and they ran in a square around the outside of the building. Lightsong walked on robes from the eastern nations, passing the finest pottery from across the inner sea. Each room was hung with paintings and brightly written poems, created by Hallandren’s finest artists.

 At the center of the palace was a small, square room that deviated from the standard reds and golds of Lightsong’s motif. This one was bright with ribbons of darker colors--deep blues, greens, and maroons. Each was a true color, directly on hue, as only a person who had obtained the Third Heightening could see.

 As Lightsong stepped into the room, the colors blazed to life, glowing in response to his presence. They became brighter, yet somehow retained their dark colorings. The maroon became a more true maroon, the navy a more powerful navy. Dark yet bright, with the powerful deep colors only BioChroma could inspire.

 In the center of the room was a child.

 Why does it always have to be a child? Lightsong thought uncomfortably.

 Llarimar and the servants waited quietly. Lightsong stepped forward, and the little girl glanced to the side, where a couple of priests stood in red and gold robes. They nodded encouragingly. She looked back toward Lightsong, still obviously nervous.

 “Here now,” Lightsong said, trying to sound encouraging. “There’s nothing to fear.”

 And yet, the girl trembled. Lecture after lecture--delivered by Llarimar, who had claimed that they were not lectures, for one did not lecture Gods--drifted into Lightsong’s head. They taught that there was nothing to fear from the Returned Gods of the Hallandren. That they were a blessing, providing visions of the future, as well as leadership and wisdom. All they needed to subsist was one thing.

 Breath.

 Lightsong hesitated, but his weakness was coming to a head. He felt slightly dizzy. Cursing himself quietly, he knelt down on one knee, taking the girl’s face in his oversized hands.

 She began to cry, but she said the words, clear and distinct as she had been taught. “My life to yours. My breath become yours.”

 Her Chromatic Breath flowed out, puffing in the air. It traveled along Lightsong’s arm--the touch was necessary--and as it reached him, he drew it in. His weakness vanished, the dizziness, replaced with crisp clarity. He felt invigorated, revitalized, alive.

 The girl grew dull. The color of her face and eyes faded slightly, though the change was very difficult to see because of Lightsong’s brilliant aura. Her brown hair lost some of its luster, her cheeks became more bland.

 It’s nothing, he thought. It doesn’t mean anything. Most people say they can’t even notice that their Breath is gone. She’ll live a full life. Happy. Her family well paid for her sacrifice.

 And Lightsong would live for another week. His aura didn’t grow stronger with each Breath he took in. That was another difference between a Returned and an Awakener. The latter were sometimes regarded as inferior, man-made approximations of the Returned.

 Yet, without a new Breath each week, Lightsong would die. Most Returned only lived eight days past the one when they came back to life. Yet, with only one Breath a week to feed them, they could continue on, ageless, with perfect bodies and minds. They would continue, seeing visions at night, supposedly able to provide divinations of the future. Hence the Court of the Gods, filled with its palaces, where Gods could be nurtured, protected, and--most importantly--fed.

 Priests scuttled forward to lead the girl out of the room. It is nothing to her, Lightsong told himself again. Nothing at all. . . .

 And yet, as she glanced at him before she was drawn away, he could see that the twinkle was gone from her eyes. She had become a Drab. A Dull, or a Faded One. A person without Breath. It would never grow back.

 The priests took her away. Lightsong turned back to his high priest, feeling guilty at his sudden energy and power. “All right,” he said. “Let’s see the Offerings.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow over his bespectacled eyes. “You’re accommodating all of a sudden.”

 I need to give something back, Lightsong thought. Even if it’s something useless.

 They passed through several more rooms of red and gold, most of which had doors on all four sides, allowing for a pathway in any direction. Near the eastern side of the palace, however, they entered a long, thin hallway. It was completely white--something very unusual in Hallandren.

 The walls of the white room were lined with paintings and poems. Lightsong stepped inside, the servants staying outside, only Llarimar joining him as Lightsong stepped up to the first painting.

 “Well?” Llarimar asked.

 It was a pastoral painting of the jungle, with drooping palms and colorful flowers. There were some of these plants in the courtyards around the Court of Gods, which was why Lightsong recognized them. After all, he’d never actually been to the jungle.

 “It’s all right,” Lightsong said. “Not my favorite. Makes me think of the jungle. I kind of wish I could visit.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow.

 “What?” Lightsong said. “I would go out in the forest, if I could. The Court gets a bit old sometimes.”

 “Not much wine in the forest, your grace,” Llarimar noted.
 “I could make some, I’m sure. Ferment. . .something. There’ve got to be things in the forest that will rot properly.”

 “I’m sure,” Llarimar said, nodding to one of his aids outside the room. The lesser priest scribbled down what Lightsong had said about the painting. Somewhere, there was a city patron who sought a blessing from Lightsong. It probably had to do with bravery--perhaps the patron had an important event coming up, and wanted to steel his will.

 The priests would interpret Lightsong’s opinion of the painting, then give the person an augury--either for good or for ill--along with the exact words Lightsong had said. Either way, the act of sending a painting in to please the God would gain the patron some measure of blessings.

 Supposedly.

 Lightsong moved away from the painting, and a lesser priest rushed forward, removing the work of art. Most likely, the person who had sent the paint hadn’t painted it himself, but had instead commissioned it. The better a painting was, the better a reaction it tended to get from the from the Gods. One’s future, it appeared, could be influenced by how much money one could afford to spend on a painting.

 I shouldn’t be so cynical, Lightsong thought. Without this system, I’d have died five years ago.

 Five years ago when he had died. He still didn’t know what had killed him, though he assumed he’d died in a somewhat heroic way. After all, he’d Returned, hadn’t he? Only those who died in a particularly noble way came back as Gods.

 Or, was that all rhetoric? Perhaps the reason nobody was allowed to talk about his former life was because they didn’t want anyone to know that Lightsong the Brave had died from a stomach cramp.

 To the side, the lesser priest threw a sheet over the jungle painting, then disappeared with it. It would be burned before the hour was out. Such offerings were made specifically for the intended God, and only he--and perhaps a few of his priests--was allowed to see them. Once Lightsong had made his comments, the works of art were destroyed.

 The next work of art was actually a poem, written in the artisan’s script. The dots of color brightened as Lightsong approached. The Hallandren artisan’s script wasn’t based on form, but on color. A dot of one color was a letter, and a dot of another color was a different letter. That, combined with double dots--one of each color--created an alphabet that was a nightmare for the colorblind.

 Of course, few people in Hallandren would admit to having that particular disease. At least, that was what Lightsong had heard. He wondered if the priests knew just how much their Gods gossiped about the outside world they’d never seen.

 The poem wasn’t a very good one, obviously composed by a peasant, who had then paid someone else to translate it to the artisan’s script. The simple dots themselves should have been a sign. True poets usually used more elaborate symbols, or even continuous lines that changed colors as they progressed. More creative uses of the alphabet formed pictures themselves. A lot could be done with a writing system with letters that could change shape without losing their meaning.

 Of course, the alphabet was sometimes difficult to read for those who didn’t have a large amount of Breath. Anyone of the Third Heightening or better--and that included all Returned--had an eye for perfect hues, as well as the ear for perfect pitch which marked their ascension to the Second Heightening. Lightsong didn’t know what it was like to live without the ability to instantly recognize and distinguish exact shades of color and sound. He could tell a perfect shade of red from one that had an extra drop of white paint in its mixture.

 He gave the peasant’s poem as good a review as he could, though he generally felt an impulse to be honest when he looked at Offerings. It seemed to be his duty, and for some reason, it was one of the few things he took seriously in life.

 They continued down the line, Lightsong giving reviews of the various paintings that hung on the wall. The room was nearly full this day, holding a strangely large number of paintings. Was there a feast or celebration he hadn’t heard about? Or, was it simply random chance that had led so many people to send him Offerings on the same day?

 The process took the better part of an hour. By the time they neared the end of the line, Lightsong was getting a little tired of looking at art, though his body--fueled by the Breath the child had given him--continued to feel strong and exhilarated.

 Lightsong paused before the final painting. It was an abstract work, something that was growing more and more popular lately--particularly in paintings sent to him, since he’d given favorable reviews to others in the past. He almost gave this one a poor grade simply because of that. It was good to keep the priests guessing at what would please him, or some of the other Gods said. Lightsong sensed that many of them were far more calculating in the way that they gave their reviews, intentionally adding cryptic meanings or obtuse commentary.

 Lightsong didn’t have the patience for things like that, especially since all anyone really ever seemed to want from him was honesty. So, he gave this last painting the time it deserved, looking over its waves of color. The canvas was thick with paint, every inch colored with large, fat strokes of the brush. The prominent hue was a deep red, almost a crimson, that Lightsong immediately knew was a red-blue mixture with a hint of black in it.

 The lines of color overlapped, one atop another, almost in a progression. Kind of like. . .waves.

 Lightsong frowned. If he looked at it right, it kind of looked like a sea. And, could that be a ship in the center? Or, was he simply imagining a form to the patterns?

 Vague impressions from his dream returned to him. A red sea. The ship, leaving.

 “Good color,” he finally said. “Nice patterns. It puts me at peace, yet has a tension to it as well. I approve.”

 Llarimar seemed to like this response. He nodded as the lesser priest--who stood a distance away--recorded Lightsong’s words.

 “So,” Lightsong said, sighing. “That’s it, I assume?”

 “Yes, your grace.”

 Lightsong nodded. Now that Offerings were done, it would be time to move on to the final, and least appealing, of his daily duties. Petitions. He had to get through them before he could get to more important activities--like taking a nap.

 Llarimar didn’t lead the way toward the petition hall, however. He simply waved a lesser priest over, then began to flip through some pages on a clipboard.

 “Well?” Lightsong asked.

 “Well what, your grace?”

 “Petitions.”

 Llarimar shook his head. “You aren’t hearing Petitions today, your grace. Remember?”

 “No. I have you to remember things like that for me.”

 “Well, then,” Llarimar said, flipping a page over, “consider it officially remembered that you have no Petitions today. Your priesthood will be otherwise employed.”

 “What?” Lightsong demanded. “Doing what?”

 “Kneeling reverently in the courtyard, your grace. Our new queen arrives today.”

 Lightsong paused. I really need to pay more attention to politics. “Today?”

 “Indeed, your grace. Our lord the God King will be married.”

 “So soon?”

 “As soon as she arrives, your grace.”

 Interesting, Lightsong thought. Susebron getting a wife. The God King would be the only of the Returned who was married--the only one allowed to get married. Returned couldn’t parent children, save for the king, who had never drawn a breath as a living man. He had been a God from birth.

 “Your grace,” Llarimar said. “We will need a Lifeless Command in order to arrange our troops on the field outside the city to welcome the queen.”

 Lightsong raised an eyebrow. “We plan to attack her?”

 Llarimar gave him a flat look.

 Lightsong chuckled. “Fledgling,” he said, giving up one of the word of Commands that would let others control the city’s Lifeless.

 Of course, it wasn’t the core command, the one that would give a person complete control over Lightsong’s ten thousand lifeless. The word he’d given to Scoot would only allow a person to command the Lifeless in non-combat situations, and would expire after one day after its first use. Lightsong often though that the convoluted system of commands used to control the Lifeless was needlessly complex. However, being one of the four Gods to hold Lifeless commands did make him rather important at times.

 The priests began to chat quietly about preparations, and about the new queen. Lightsong waited, still thinking about Susebron and the impending wedding. He leaned back, folding his arms and resting against the side of the doorway.

 “Scoot?” he finally asked.

 “Yes, your grace?”

 “Did I have a wife? Before the Return, I mean.”

 Llarimar paused. “You know I cannot speak of your life before your Return, Lightsong. I have done my best to avoid learning about it. Knowledge of your past life won’t do either of us any good.”

 Lightsong leaned his head back, resting it against the wall, looking up at the white ceiling. “I. . .remember a face, sometimes,” he said softly. “I think it might have been her. A beautiful face.”

 The priests hushed.

 “Deep brown hair,” Lightsong said. “Red lips, three shades shy of pure, but with a deep beauty of their own. Dark skin.”

 A priest scuttled forward with the red tome, and Llarimar started writing furiously. He didn’t prompt for more information--he simply took down Lightsong’s words as they came. He obviously didn’t want to taint the augury.

 Lightsong fell silent, turning away from the men and their scribbling pens. What’s it matter? he thought. That life is gone. Instead, I get to be a God. Even if I don’t believe in the religion itself, the perks are nice.

 He walked away from the room, leaving Llarimar behind, yet being trailed by a fleet of servants and lesser priests to see to his needs. Offerings done, dreams recorded, and petitions canceled, Lightsong was free to pursue his own activities.

 However, he didn’t return to his main chambers. Instead, he made his way out onto his patio deck and waved for a pavilion to be set up for him.

 If a new queen was going to arrive today, he wanted to get a good look at her.

Warbreaker

Chapter Four

 Sitting quietly, looking out the window of her carriage, Siri realized something intimidating: her people had no idea what it meant to be ostentatious. Flowers weren’t ostentatious. Ten soldiers protecting a carriage was not ostentatious. Crying in public wasn’t ostentatious.

 The field of forty thousand soldiers, dressed in brilliant blue and gold, standing in perfect rows, spears raised high with blue tassels flapping in the wind. . .that was ostentatious. The twin line of cavalrymen atop enormous, thick-hooved horses--both men and beasts draped with golden cloth that shimmered in the sun. That was ostentatious. The massive city, spread out before her, so large it made her mind feel numb to consider it, domes and spires and painted walls all competing to draw her attention. That was ostentatious.

 She’d thought that she was prepared. The carriage had passed through cities as they’d made their way into Hallandren proper. She’d seen the houses, their outer walls painted with bright colors and patterns. She’d stayed at inns, with plush beds that were so soft it had been difficult to sleep. She’d eaten foods mixed with spices that made her sneeze.

 Yet, she hadn’t been prepared for her reception in T’Telir. Not at all.

 Her soldiers pulled in tight around the carriage, as if unconsciously wishing they could climb inside and hide from the overwhelming sight of the Hallandren capital. It was built up against the shores of the Bright Sea, a landlocked body of water. She could see it in the distance beyond T’Telir, reflecting the sunlight and looking true to its name.

 She knew that the Hallandren people liked color. She had known that their cities were bigger than those up in Idris. Yet, that knowledge hadn’t been enough.

 Blessed Lord of Colors. . . . she thought.

 A figure in deep blue and silver robes rode up to her carriage. Tis robes weren’t simple garments, like the monks wore back in Idris. These had massive, peaked shoulders that almost looked like some kind of armor, as well as a matching headdress. Another might have called it a hat, but it seemed far too ornate. Hats were things one wore in the highlands to keep one’s ears warm. This. . .combined with the brilliant colors and exaggerated layers of the robes, made Siri want to shrink back into her carriage. She felt her hair paling to a colorless white as the figure approached her window.

 He bowed. “Lady Sisirinah Royal,” the man said in a deep voice, “I am Tridees, high priest of his Grace, Susebron the Majestic, Returned God and King of Hallandren. You will accept this token honor guard to guide you to the Court of Gods.”

 Token? Siri thought.

 The priest was didn’t wait for a response. He spun his horse, as if he considered her approval or disapproval to be immaterial, and started back toward the city. Her carriage rolled after him, her soldiers marching uncomfortably around the vehicle.

 Siri sat back, eyes wide. The truth was, she was too overwhelmed to do much else.

 As they rolled down the highway, they left the jungle behind. It gave way to sporadic bunches of palm trees, and Siri was surprised to see how much sand was mixed with the dirt. Her view of the landscape soon grew obstructed by the vast field of soldiers who stood at attention on either side of the road.

 “Austre, God of Colors!” one of Siri’s guards suddenly exclaimed. “They’re not breathing!”

 Siri’s hair--which had begun to drift to auburn--snapped to fearful white again. The soldier was right. The faces of the Hallandren troops standing on the vast fields had dull grey skin, with no color in them. The eyes, the skin, even the hair--it looked as if it had been drained completely of color, leaving behind only a monochrome grey.

 Those can’t be Lifeless! she thought. They look like men!

 Of course, she immediately realized that it was a silly thought. What were they supposed to look like? Lifeless were men who had died, then been brought back to life as mindless soldiers by the Hallandren use of BioChromatic Breath.

 Yet, she’d imagined Lifeless as skeletal creatures, the flesh rotting and falling from the bones. These that she passed looked so human--without anything to distinguish them save for their lack of color and the stiff expressions on their faces.

 As she watched closer, however, she could see other differences. They stood unnaturally motionless. Still, unmoving eyes--the eyes of dead men. No shuffling, no breathing, no quivers of muscle or limb. They were like statues, an image only heightened by their grey skin.

 And. . .I’m going to marry one of these things? Siri thought. But no, Returned were something different, weren’t they? She could vaguely remember a time when someone back in her village had Returned. It had been nearly ten years back, and her father hadn’t let her visit the person. They’d died again a week later.

 The Returned weren’t the same as Lifeless. They had minds, at least--Lifeless couldn’t speak. They could just fight. Returned were. . . .

 She honestly didn’t know. The tutors had talked about the difference, of course, but she’d tended to skip those lessons. After all, what would have been the point? She hadn’t expected to ever have to deal with either Returned or Lifeless.

 Eventually, they passed beyond the ranks of Lifeless. The city gates were next, dauntingly large, but these were also different from what she had expected. The gates were almost more artistic than they were functional. The walltop was curved in massive half-circles, like rolling hills, and the rim above was plated with a golden metal. The gates themselves were in the form of two twisting, lithe sea creatures who curved up in a massive archway, open to let the carriage and the cavalry escort--which appeared to be composed of living men--through.

 Siri had always thought of Hallandren as a place of death. Her impressions were based on stories told by passing Ramblemen or by old men at the winter hearth, and they told of city walls built of skulls, then painted with sloppy, ugly streaks of color. She’d imagined the buildings inside splattered with different clashing hues. She’d imagined a place that used color arrogantly, obscenely.

 That wasn’t the case. True, was an arrogance to T’Telir. A grandness--it was like every new wonder was trying to grab her attention and shake her about by her eyes. People lined the street--more people than Siri had seen in her entire life. They crowded together to watch her carriage pass, and if there were poor among them, Siri couldn’t tell, for they all wore bright colored clothing. Some did wear more exaggerated outfits--probably merchants, since Hallandren was said to have no nobility beyond its Gods--but even the simplest of clothing had a cheerful brightness to it.

 Buildings were painted with vibrant colors and patterns, and many of them did seem to clash to her eyes. Yet, none of it looked sloppy--just overdone. There was an eye for craftsmanship and art to everything she passed, from the storefronts, to the people, to statures of mighty soldiers that frequently stood on comers.

 It was terribly overwhelming. And yet, as she grew a little more accustomed to the overload of color, she recognized beauty in what she saw. It was garish, but it was a vibrant, enthusiastic garishness. Siri found herself smiling--her hair turning a tentative blonde--though she felt a headache coming on.

 Maybe. . .maybe this is why Father sent me, Siri thought. Vivenna wouldn’t have been able to stand all of this. Training or no training, she would have never been able to fit in here. But, I’ve always been far too interested in color.

 It made sense. Strange sense, true, but everything about her life had been strange lately. Her father was king--he had instincts that nobody else understood. What if, after twenty years of raising and training Vivenna, he had realized that she just wasn’t the daughter who could best help Idris?

 I. . .I can do this, Siri thought as the carriage moved toward the southern section of the city. Everyone fears that Hallandren will invade Idris, treaty or no treaty. That’s why Father had to send one of his daughters to assuage them.

 This is my job. My duty. I need to please their God, and keep him from attacking my people.

 It felt strange, realizing just how much had been placed upon her. Duty was something unfamiliar to her, and not a little unsettling.

 But, she’d been sent. For the first time in either of their lives, Father had chosen Siri over Vivenna. He trusted her with the very fate and lives of his people. She couldn’t run, or escape, or hide. Like it or not, duty had been thrust upon her.

 She wasn’t certain what she thought of that. One thing was certain. Her nervousness was returning.

 I’m. . .getting married. Today.

 She couldn’t think about that any more. She’d focused on it during most of her ride, and it was driving her mad with anxiety. As her hair grew white with fear, she turned her attention to the city again, trying to distract herself by its sights.

 That wasn’t hard, considering how demanding the city’s sights were. It was enormous, sprawling like a tired beast across the landscape, curled around and over hills. As the carriage climbed the southern section of town, she could see--through breaks in the buildings--that the Bright Sea broke into a bay before the city. T’Telir curved around the bay, running right up to the water, forming a crescent shape. The city wall, then, only had to run in a half-circle, abutting the sea, keeping the city boxed in.

 It didn’t seem that cramped, however. There was a lot of open space in the city--walkways and gardens, large swaths of unused land. Palms lined many of the streets, and foliage was common. And, with the cool breeze coming over the sea, the area was actually a lot more temperate than she had expected.

 Her carriage continued, the road leading to something of a sea-side overlook, a small hill plateau that had an excellent view. Except, it appeared to be surrounded by a large, obstructive wall. Siri watched with growing apprehension as the gates to this smaller, city-within-a-city opened up to let the carriage, soldiers, and priests enter.

 The people stayed on the outside.

 There was another wall inside, a kind of barrier to keep anyone from seeing in through the gate. As the gates closed behind, the procession turned left and rounded the blinding wall, entering the Hallandren Court of Gods.

 The enclosed, green-grassed courtyard held mansions. Two or three dozen of them, spread out in a circle, each one painted a distinct color. At the far end was a massive black structure, much taller than the other mansions.

 The walled courtyard was quiet and still. Siri could see some figures sitting on balconies, watching as her carriage rolled across the grass courtyard. In front of each of the palaces, a small fleet of men and women lay prostrate on the grass. The colors of their clothing matched that of the building they were in front of.

 Siri, however, spared little time to study them. Instead, she nervously peered out the side of the carriage as it approached the large, black building at the end of the courtyard. It was slightly pyramidal in shape, with step-like blocks climbing up the outside.

 Siri sat quietly. Black, she thought. In a city of color. Her hair remained a nervous white.

 She suddenly wished she’d spent more of her life being religious. Somehow, she doubted Austre was all that impressed with her. She even had trouble naming the Five Visions most days.

 But, he’d watch over her in the name of her people, wouldn’t he?

 The procession pulled to a stop at the base of the enormous, triangular building. Siri looked up through the window, seeing the clefts and knobs at the summit, which made the architecture seem top-heavy. She almost felt as if the dark blocks above would come tumbling down in an avalanche to bury her.

 The priest rode his horse back up to Siri’s window. The horsemen waited quietly, the shuffling of their beasts the only sound in the massive, open courtyard.

 “We have arrived, Vessel,” the man said. “As soon as we enter the building, you will be prepared and taken to your husband.”

 “Husband?” Siri asked uncomfortably. “But, won’t there be a wedding?”

 The priest smirked. “A ceremony? The God King does not need ceremonial validation or justification to take what he wants. You became his wife the moment he desired it.”

 Siri shivered. “I was just hoping that maybe I could see him, before, you know. . . .”

 The priest shot her a harsh look. “The God King does not perform for your whims, woman. You are blessed above all other people, for you will be allowed to touch him--if only at his discretion. Do not pretend that you are anything other than you are. You have come because he desires it, and you will obey his will. Otherwise, you will be put aside and another will chosen in your place--which, I think, might bode unfavorably for your rebel friends in the highlands.”

 Rebel friends?

 The priest spun his horse, then clopped his way toward a large stone ramp, leading up to the building. The carriage lurched into motion, and Siri was drawn forward to be presented before her new husband.

Warbreaker

Chapter Five

 This will complicate things, Vasher thought, standing atop the wall that enclosed the Court of the Gods. Below, the new queen’s carriage rolled up into the God King’s palace.

 The building seemed odd to a lot of people. A deep black structure, blocky and ominous, in a city full of curves and colors? Why would someone have crafted it? They didn’t understand.

 Bright colors were about standing out. And, what stood out more than a scar of black in the middle of Hallandren?

 What’s wrong? Nightblood asked. So the rebels sent a princess. Doesn’t change your plans.

 Vasher didn’t respond at first. He waited, watching, as the carriage crept up the incline and disappeared into the palace’s maw.

 What? Nightblood demanded. Even still, after all of these years, he reacted like a child in many ways.

 She’ll be used, Vasher thought. I doubt we’ll be able to get through this without dealing with her. He hadn’t believed that the Idris would actually send royal blood back to T’Telir. They’d given up a pawn of terrible value.

 Vasher turned away from the Court, wrapping his sandaled foot around one of the banners that ran down the outside of the wall. Then, he released his Breath.

 “Lower me,” he Commanded.

 The large tapestry--crafted from wool threads--sucked a lot of Breath out of him. It hadn’t the form of a man, plus it was massive in size. Still, he now had enough Breath to spend in such ways.

 The massive tapestry rose, a thing alive, and formed a hand, picking Vasher up and lifting him into the air. Like always, it tried to approximate the form of a human--looking closely at the twistings and undulations of the fabric, Vasher could see outlines of muscles and even veins. There was no reason for them--the Breath animated the fabric, and no muscles were necessary for it to move. Yet, it imitated them, lifting Vasher carefully from the wall-top and lowering him down toward the ground. At the end, it pinched him by one shoulder, placing his feet carefully on the street.

 “Your Breath to Mine,” he commanded, taking the Breath back into himself. The large banner-tapestry lost its form immediately, life vanishing, and it fluttered back against the wall.

 Some few people paused in the street, watching. Yet, they were interested, not awed. This was T’Telir, home of the Gods themselves. Men with upwards of a thousand Breaths were uncommon, but not unheard of. The people gawked a bit--like peasants in other kingdoms might pause to watch the carriage of a passing lord--but then generally just moved on with their daily activities.

 Not that he could have avoided the attention. Though he still dressed in his standard outfit--ragged trousers, well-worn cloak despite the heat, a rope wrapped several times around his waist for a belt--he now caused colors to brighten noticeably when he was near. The change would be noticeable to normal people, and blatantly obvious to those of at least the First Heightening.

 His days of being able to hide and skulk through undergrounds were over. He’d have to grow accustomed to getting noticed again. That was one of the reasons he was glad to be in T’Telir. The city was large enough, and filled with enough oddities--from Lifeless soldiers, to Awakened objects serving everyday functions--that even though he’d be noticed, he probably wouldn’t stand out too much.

 Of course, that didn’t take Nightblood into account. Vasher moved through the crowds, carrying the overly-heavy sword in one hand, sheathed point extending behind him and nearly dragging on the ground. The weapon drew its own reactions. Some would shy away from it immediately, even if they didn’t realize why. Others would watch it, eyes lingering far too long.

 No. He would not be able to move about in this city without being noticed. Not unless he stuffed Nightblood back in his pack.

 Oh, no you don’t, Nightblood said. Don’t even start thinking about that. I’ve been locked away for too long.

 What does it matter to you? Vasher thought.

 I fade if I don’t get fresh air, Nightblood said. And sunlight.

 You’re a sword, Vasher thought, not a palm tree. The sack or the air, it’s the same to you.

 Nightblood fell silent. He was smart enough to realize that he was not a person. However, he didn’t like being confronted with that fact. It tended to put him in a sullen mood.

 That suited Vasher just fine.

 He made his way to a restaurant a few streets down from the Court of Gods. This was one thing he had missed about T’Telir: restaurants. In most cities, inns and taverns provided the only dining options. If you were going to stay in a city for a while, you hired a local woman to give you meals at her table. If you were staying for a short time, you ate whatever your innkeeper gave you.

 In T’Telir, however, the population was large enough--and rich enough--to support dedicated food providers. It had something unique in the world: restaurants, even some that pandered to the lower income levels.

 Vasher had a booth reserved already, and the waiter simply nodded him to the spot. Vasher sat, setting Nightblood up beside the wall.

 The sword was stolen within a minute of his letting go of it.

 He ignored that fact, sitting quietly as the waiter brought him a warm cup of citrus tea. Vasher sipped at the sweetened liquid, sucking on the bit of a rind, wondering why in the world a people who lived in a tropical lowland preferred heated teas.

 A few minutes later, his tea half done, his BioChroma warned him that he was being watched. Eyes were watching him. Eventually, that same BioChroma alerted him that someone was approaching. Vasher sipped his tea, though he did pull his dagger from his belt with his free hand. The browns of the his wooden table heightened just slightly.

 The priest sat down opposite Vasher in the booth. He wore street clothing, but--perhaps unconsciously--he had still chosen to wear the white and green of his deity. Vasher slipped his dagger back into its sheath, masking the sound by taking a loud sip of his tea.

 The priest, Bebid, shuffled a bit. He gave off an aura to the colors around him that indicated he had enough Breath to have barely reached the First Heightening. It was where most people--those who could afford to buy Breath--stopped. It would extend their lifespan by a good decade or so, give them an increased sense regarding the life around them. It would also let them see auras and distinguish other Awakeners, and--in a pinch--let them to a little Awakening themselves. A decent trade for spending enough money to feed a peasant family for some fifty years.

 “Well?” Vasher asked.

 Bebid actually jumped at the sound. Vasher sighed, closing his eyes. The priest was not accustomed to these kinds of clandestine meetings. He wouldn’t have come at all, had Vasher not exerted certain. . .pressures on him.

 Vasher opened his eyes, staring at the priest as the waiter arrived with two plates of spiced rice. Textees food was the restaurant’s specialty--the Hallandren liked foreign spices as much as they liked odd colors. Vasher had placed the order earlier, along with a payment that would keep the surrounding booths closed.

 “I. . .” Bebid said. “I don’t know. Haven’t been able to find out much.”

 Vasher regarded the man with a flat stare.

 “You have to give me more time.”

 “Remember your daughter, friend,” Vasher said, drinking the last of his tea, feeling a twinge of annoyance. Do we really have to go through this again?

 Bebid was quiet for a time. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Vasher,” he said, leaning in. “I’m a priest of Brightvison the True. I can’t betray my oaths!”

 “Good thing I’m not asking you to, then.”

 “We’re not supposed to release information about Court politics. We’re trusted.”

 “Don’t give me that,” Vasher snapped. “Those Returned can’t so much as look at one another without half of the city learning about it within the hour.”

 “Surely you’re not implying--” Bebid said.

 Vasher gritted his teeth, bending his spoon with his finger in annoyance. “Enough, Bebid. We both know that your oaths are all just part of the game.” He leaned in. “And I really hate games.”

 Bebid paled slightly, and didn’t touch his meal. Vasher eyed his spoon with annoyance, bent it back, calming himself. He shoveled in another spoonful of rice, mouth burning slightly from the spices. He’d never really believed in letting food sit around uneaten--you never knew when you’d have to run away in a hurry.

 “There have been. . .rumors,” Bebid finally said. “This goes beyond simple Court politics, Vasher--beyond games played between Gods. This is something very real, and very quiet. Quiet enough that most of the priests only hear hints of it. That’s hard to do, in such a closed place as the Court.”

 Vasher continued to eat.

 “There is a faction of the Court who is pushing us to attack Idris,” Bebid said. “Though I can’t fathom why.”

 “Don’t be an idiot,” Vasher said, wishing he had more tea to wash down the rice. “We both know it’s a sound idea for Hallandren to slaughter every person up in those highlands.”

 “Royals,” Bebid said quietly.

 Vasher nodded. They were called rebels. But, in truth, those ‘rebels’ were composed of the true Hallandren royal family, who had fled there during the Manywar. Mortal men or not, their bloodline was a challenge to the Court of Gods.

 Any good monarch knew that the first thing you needed for stability was to execute anyone who had a better claim on the throne than yourself. After that, it was usually a good idea to execute everyone who thought they might have a better claim on the throne than yourself.

 “I need to contact this faction,” Vasher said.

 “Vasher,” Bebid said, leaning in even further. “I’m not lying when I say that I can’t help you here. I’m not the right one. My lady isn’t interested in these kinds of political games, and I move in the wrong circles.”

 Vasher remained quiet, judging the man’s sincerity. The man’s BioChromatic aura made the colors glow brightly around him, and to one with the First Heightening, the air seemed to warp just slightly. Like the air on a hot day.

 “All right,” Vasher said. “Who, then?”

 Bebid relaxed, using his napkin to wipe his brow. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe one of Mercystar’s priests? You could also try Bluefingers, I suppose.”

 “Bluefingers? That’s an odd name for a God.”

 “Bluefingers isn’t a God,” Bebid said, chuckling. “That’s just a nickname. He’s the High Place steward, head of the scribes. Those who follow him like to call him ‘Bluefingers the Anal.’ He pretty much keeps the Court running--if anyone knows anything about this faction, it will be him. Of course, he’s so stiff and straight, you’ll have a hard time breaking him.”

 “You’d be surprised,” Vasher said, shoveling the last bit of rice into his mouth. “I got you, didn’t I?”

 “I guess.”

 Vasher stood. “Pay the waiter when you leave,” he said, grabbing his cloak off its peg and wandering out of the building. He could feel a. . .sucking void to his right. He turned and walked down the street, then turned down an alley, where he found Nightblood--still sheathed--sticking from the chest of the thief who had stolen him. Another cutpurse lay dead on the alley floor.

 Vasher pulled the sword free, then snapped the sheath closed--it had only been opened a fraction of an inch--and did up the snap.

 You lost your temper in there for a bit, Nightblood said with a chastising voice. I thought you were going to work on that.

 Guess I’m relapsing, Vasher thought.

 Nightblood paused. I don’t think you ever really unlapsed in the first place.

 That’s not a word, Vasher said, leaving the alley, walking back toward his inn.

 So? Nightblood said. You’re too worried about words. That priest--you spent all those words on him, then you just let him go. It’s not really how I would have handled the situation.

 Yes, I know, Vasher said. Your way would have involved making several more corpses.

 Well, I am a sword, as you keep pointing out, Nightblood said with a mental huff. Might as well stick to what you’re good at. . . .

#

 Lightsong watched his new queen’s carriage pull up to the palace, then disappear into its open unloading hallway. He sipped his wine.

 “Well, this has been a pleasant day,” he noted, sitting on his balcony. Having had his wine and a bit of time to avoid thinking about things like children without Breath, he’d begun to feel more like his regular self.

 “You’re that happy to have a queen?” Llarimar asked.

 “I’m that happy to have avoided Petitions for the day. Sit down and stop looming. You’re giving me a headache.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow. It was impossible for a God to feel any normal ailment, headache included. However, the priest did sit on one of the balcony’s wooden lounging chairs. Two potted palms waved in the wind, and in the distance, Lightsong could see over the Court wall and out to the sea.

 I wonder if I sailed it once, he thought. A man of the ocean? Is that how I died? Is that why I dreamed of a sailing ship?

 Llarimar appeared to relax slightly as he sat, and Lightsong smiled to himself as the man removed the bulky mitre from his head. Underneath, Llarimar’s dark hair was plastered to his head with sweat. He ran his hand through it, though he continued to sit forward on the chair, rather than lounging back like Lightsong.

 Llarimar was, like all priests, rather stuffy. However, for a priest, he was rather easy to suffer. During the first few years, Llarimar had remained stiff and formal all the time. Eventually, however, Lightsong had worn him down.

 After all, Lightsong was the God--in his opinion, if he could lounge on the job, then so could his priests. The opinion was apparently beginning to work its way through Llarimar’s head.

 “I don’t know, your Excellency,” Llarimar said slowly, rubbing his chin. “I don’t like this.”

 “Why not?” Lightsong asked.

 “We haven’t had a queen in the Court for some thirty years. I don’t know how the factions will deal with her arrival.”

 “Ah,” Lightsong said, rubbing his forehead. “Politics, Llarimar? You know I frown on such things.”

 Llarimar eyed him. “Your Excellency, you are--by default--a politician.”

 “Don’t remind me, please. I should very well like to extract myself from the situation. Do you think, perhaps, I could pay one of the other Gods to take control of my Lifeless commands? They could have twice as much power, and I could have half as many stomach aches.”

 “I doubt that would be possible,” Llarimar said. “And, if it were, I’m sure it would be a poor decision.”

 “It’s all part of my master plan to ensure that I become totally and redundantly useless to this city by the time I die. Again.”

 Llarimar paused. “Redundantly useless.”

 “Of course. Regular uselessness wouldn’t be enough--I am, after all, a God. As for the Idris woman, I find her arrival to be a quite pleasant event. Now, perhaps, people will stop moaning about the lack of true Royal blood in the Divine Monarchy, and we can go back to complaining about more important things, such as why we--being Gods--can’t force cherries to be in season all year.”

 Lightsong glanced toward the High Palace, with its black stones and glass-like ornamentations. He knew what Llarimar was thinking--the gossip had arrived already. Old Dedelin hadn’t sent his firstborn daughter. He’d sent the youngest. A Royal, true, but not the heir to the full Royal line.

 It would mean more arguments. More hesitance. And, unfortunately, more headaches. Lightsong still thought he should be able to feel those, even if his head itself refused to comply.

 “Still,” Llarimar said, as if talking to himself. “They did send someone. That is a good sign, I suppose. An outright refusal would have meant war.”

 “War. The only thing worse than politics.”

 “Some say they are the same, your grace.”

 Lightsong shrugged. “At least politics doesn’t make you march about on an empty stomach--unless you count the nausea I feel every time I have to deal with someone trying to pull me into their faction.”

 “What will the Idrian rebels do now, you think?” Llarimar said idly, ignoring--as usual--Lightsong’s witty remarks. Lightsong would have been offended if he hadn’t known there were three separate lesser priests standing at the back of the building, recording his words, searching for wisdom and meaning within them.

 He did his best to make them work hard for their pay.

 “That’s the thing, Spook,” Lightsong said, leaning back, closing his eyes and feeling the sun on his face. “The Idris don’t consider themselves to be rebels. They’re not sitting up in their hills, waiting for the day when they can be accepted back into Hallandren. This isn’t their homeland any more. They have a new one.”

 “Those peaks they control are hardly a kingdom.”

 “They’re enough of a kingdom to control all the area’s best mineral deposits, four vital passes to the north, and the original Royal line of Hallandren. They don’t need us, my friend.”

 “And the talk of Idris dissidents in the city?” Llarimar asked. “Rousing the people against the Court of Gods?”

 “Rumors only,” Lightsong said. “Though, when I’m proven wrong and the underprivileged masses storm my palace and burn me to death, I’ll be sure to inform them that you were right all along. You’ll get the last laugh. Or. . .well, the last scream, since you’ll probably be tied up next to me.”

 Llarimar’s sighed, and Lightsong opened his eyes to find the priest regarding him. The priest didn’t, however, chastise Lightsong for his levity. Llarimar just reached down, putting his headdress back on.

 Llarimar was the priest; Lightsong the God. There would be no questioning of motives, no rebukes, no demands. If Lightsong gave a command, or even an implication, they would all do exactly as he said.

 Sometimes, that terrified him.

 But not this day. He was, instead, a bit annoyed. Llarimar had somehow gotten him talking about politics--and the day had been going so well.

 “More wine,” Lightsong said, raising his cup.

 “You can’t get drunk, your grace,” Llarimar noted. “Your body is immune to all toxins.”

 “I know,” Lightsong said as a lesser servant filled his cup. “But trust me--I’m quite good at pretending.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Six

 Siri stepped from the carriage, and was swarmed by dozens of servants. They all wore blue and silver, like the priest who had led her into the palace, and they bustled around her, pulling her away. Siri turned, alarmed, looking back toward her soldiers and the carriage. The men stepped forward, but Tridees held up his hand.

 “The Vessel will go alone,” he said.

 Siri glanced back. She felt a stab of fear. This was the time.

 “Return to Idris,” she found herself saying to the men.”

 “But, my lady--” the lead soldier said.

 “No,” the priest said. “You can do nothing more for her here. Return and tell your king that you delivered her safely.”

 The lead soldier glanced back at his men, uncertain. Siri didn’t get to see if they obeyed or not, for the servants shuffled her around a corner into a long, black hallway.

 Siri let herself get pulled along, trying to show a resolved face. She’d come to the palace to be wedded, and was determined to make a favorable impression on the God King.

 Yet, she didn’t really feel that. She was really just terrified. What was she doing? Why hadn’t she run, or wiggled out of this somehow? Why couldn’t they have all just left her alone?

 There was no escape now, however. The serving women moved around her, leading her down a the corridor into the deep black palace. The last remnants of her former life disappeared behind her.

 She was now alone.

 Lanterns with colored glass lit the walls, and Siri was led through several twists and turns in the dark passages. She tried to remember her way back to the carriage, but was soon hopelessly lost.

 The servants surrounded her like an honor guard, but did not prod or push her, now that she was moving without reluctance. They kept their eyes down, none of them looking directly at her. Though all were female, they were of differing ages. Each wore a blue cap on the head, hair loose out the back. Their clothing was of a shimmering blue, and was loose-fitting, even through the bust. Siri blushed at the low-cut fronts. In Idris, women kept even the necks covered, but everyone said that the Hallandren people were far more relaxed about showing skin.

 After a few minutes, the black corridor opened into a much larger room. Siri paused in the doorway. This room wasn’t black. Or, while the walls of stone were black--she could see tiny bits peeking through--they had been draped in silks of a deep maroon. In fact, everything in the room was maroon, from the carpeting, to the furniture, to the tubs--surrounded by tile--in the center of the room.

 The servants began to pick at her clothing, undressing her. Siri jumped, swatting at a few of their hands, causing them to pause in surprise.

 Then, they attacked with renewed vigor, and she realized that she didn’t really have a choice in the matter. She gritted her teeth and bore the treatment, raising her arms up, letting the servants pull off her dress and underclothing. She felt her hair grow red as she blushed. At least the room was warm.

 She shivered anyway, standing, naked, as other servants approached, bearing measuring tapes. They poked and prodded, getting various measurements, including ones around Siri’s waist, bust, shoulders, and hips. When that was finished, the women backed away, and the room fell still. The bath continued to steam in the center of the chamber, and several of the serving women gestured toward it.

 Guess I’m allowed to wash myself, Siri thought with relief, walking up the tile steps. She stepped carefully into the massive tub, and was pleased at how warm the water was. She climbed down the tile steps, relaxing in the hot water.

 Soft splashes sounded behind her, and she spun. Several of the serving women were climbing down into the tub, fully clothed, bearing scrubbing instruments and soap. Siri sighed, yielding herself to their care as they began to scrub vigorously at her body and hair. She closed her eyes, enduring the treatment with as much dignity as she could manage.

 Of course, doing that only brought back to her memory just what was happening too her, and she began to grow nervous again.

 The Lifeless weren’t as bad as the stories, she thought, trying to reassure her. And the city colors are far more pleasant than I expected. Maybe. . .maybe the God King isn’t as terrible as everyone says.

 “Ah, good,” a voice said. “We’re right on schedule. Perfect.”

 Siri paused. That was a man’s voice. She snapped her eyes open to find an older man in brown robes standing on the steps up to the tub, writing something on a ledger. He was balding, and had a round, pleasant face. A young boy stood next to him, bearing extra sheets of paper and a small jar of ink for the man to use in dipping his quill.

 Siri yelped, startling several of her servants, as she splashed in the water, covering herself with her arms.

 The man with the ledger paused, looking down. “Is something wrong, vessel?”

 “I’m bathing,” she snapped.

 “Yes,” the man said. “I believe I can tell that.”

 “Well, what are you doing watching?”

 The man cocked his head. “But, I’m a royal servant, far beneath your station. . . .” he said, then trailed off. “Ah, yes. Idris sensibilities--I’ve read of them, of course. Ladies, please splash around a bit, make some more bubbles in the bath.”

 The serving women did as asked, churning up bubbles and foam from the soapy water.

 “There,” the man said, turning back to his ledger. “I can’t see a thing. Now, let us get on with this. It would not do to keep the God King waiting on his wedding night, now would it!”

 Siri reluctantly allowed the bathing to continue, though she was careful to keep certain bits of anatomy well beneath the water. The women worked furiously, scrubbing at her body hard enough that Siri was half-afraid they’d rub her skin right off.

 “As you might guess,” the man said, “we’re on a very tight schedule. There’s much to do, and very little time to do it. I would like this all to go as smoothly as possible.”

 Siri frowned. “And. . .who exactly are you?”

 The man looked over at her, causing her to duck down beneath the suds a little bit more. Her hair, she noticed, was as bright a red as it had ever been.

 “My name is Havarseth, but everyone just calls me Bluefingers.” He held up a hand and wiggled the fingers, which were all stained dark with blue ink from writing. “I am head scribe and steward to his Excellent Grace Susebron, God King of Hallandren. In simpler terms, I manage the palace attendants, as well as oversee all servants in the Court of Gods.”

 He paused, eying her. “I also make certain that everyone stays on schedule and does what they are supposed to.”

 Some of the younger girls began bringing pitchers of water to the side of the tub, and the women used these to rinse Siri’s hair. She turned, trying to keep a waterlogged eye on Bluefingers and his serving boy.

 “Now,” Bluefingers said, turning back to his ledger. “The palace tailors are working very quickly on your gown. We had a good estimate of your size, but the final measurements were, of course, necessary to complete the process. We should have the garment ready for you in a short time.”

 The serving women dunked Siri’s head again.

 “There are some things we need to discuss,” Bluefingers continued. “I presume you have been primed and taught concerning the proper method of treating his Royal Excellency?”

 Siri fell silent.

 “Ah,” Bluefingers said, apparently reading her expression. “Well then, this could be. . .interesting. Allow me to give you some suggestions.”

 Siri nodded.

 “First, please understand that the Emperor’s will is law. He needs no reason or justification for what he does. Your life, like all of our lives, is in his hands. Second, please understand that the God King does not speak with people such as you or I. You will not talk to him when you go to him. Do you understand?”

 Siri spit out a bit of soapy water. “The priest said something about that before. You mean I’m not even able to be able to speak to my husband?”

 “I’m afraid not,” Bluefingers said. “None of us can.”

 “Then how does he make judgments and rulings?” she asked, wiping her eyes.

 “The Council of Gods handles most mundane matters,” Bluefingers explained. “The God King is above the day-to-day governance of the kingdom. When it does become necessary for him to communicate, he gives his judgments to his priests, who then reveal it to the world.”

 She nodded again.

 “It is unconventional that you are allowed to touch him,” Bluefingers continued. “Fathering a child is a necessary annoyance for him. It is our job to present you in as pleasing a way as possible, and avoid--at all costs--irritating him in any way.”

 Austre, God of colors, she thought. What kind of creature is this?

 Bluefingers eyed her. “I know something of your temperament, Vessel,” he said. “We have, of course, done research about the children of the Idris monarchy. Let me be a little more personal, and perhaps a little too direct. If you speak directly to the God King, he will likely order you executed. I would not risk offending him. He is not a man of patience, like your father.

 “I cannot stress this point enough, Vessel. I realize fully that you are accustomed to being one of the most important people in your homeland. Indeed, here you still are that important--if not more so. You are far above myself and these others. However, as far as you are above us, the God King is even farther above you.

 “The God King is. . .something special. The earth itself is too base for him. He is one who obtained transcendence before he was even born, but he Returned to us to bring blessings and visions. We owe much of our kingdom’s success to him. You are being given a special trust. Please, do not betray it--and please, please to not rile his anger. Do you understand?”

 Siri nodded slowly, feeling her hair bleach back to white. She let herself slid down a bit further into the suds. She tried to steel herself, but any bit of courage she could gather felt like a sham.

 No. No, this creature wasn’t going to be like the Lifeless or the city colors. His reputation in Idris wasn’t exaggerated.

 He could execute her on a whim. And, in a short time, he was going to take her body and do with it as he wished. Part of her felt a rage at that--but it was the rage of frustration. The rage that came from the terror of knowing that something horrible was coming, and being unable to do anything at all about it.

 The serving women had backed away from her, leaving her half-floating in the soapy water. One of the servants turned to Bluefingers and nodded her head in respect.

 “Ah, finished are we?” he asked. “Excellent. You and your ladies are efficient, as always, Jajalna. Let us proceed, then.”

 “Can’t they speak?” Siri asked quietly.

 “Of course they can,” Bluefingers said. “But, they are dedicated servants of his Excellency. During their hours of service, their duty is to be as useful as possible without being distracting. They only speak when necessary. Now, if you’ll continue. . . .”

 Siri stayed in the water, even when the silent women tried to pull her out. Bluefingers frowned and looked up from his ledger. Then, he turned around with a sigh, putting his back to her. He reached over and turned the serving boy around as well.

 Still feeling a little numb from shock and fear, Siri finally allowed herself to be led out of the bath. The wet women left her, walking into a side room--probably to change--and several others approached, leading Siri toward a smaller tub, apparently intended for rinsing.

 She stepped down into the water, which was much colder than the other bath, and shivered. As soon as she was down in it, the women motioned for her to dunk. She did so, shaking herself about a bit, then came out and rinsed her hair. The women motioned for her to step out again, and she did so. There was a final, third tub, also smaller. As she approached, shivering, Siri could smell strong floral scents coming from it.

 “If you prefer,” Bluefingers said “you may have one of the palace masseuses rub perfume onto your body instead of using the perfumed bath. I advise against that, however, considering time restraints. . . .”

 Siri blushed, imagining anyone--male or female--rubbing her body with perfume. “This will be fine,” she said, climbing down into the water. It was lukewarm, and the floral scents were so strong that she cringed.

 The women motioned downward, and--sighing--Siri dunked beneath the scented water. After that, she climbed out, and several women finally approached with fluffy towels. They began to pat Siri down, working with care, their touch as delicate and soft as the previous scrubbing had been hard. This took away some of the strong scent, for which Siri was glad, but she still smelled powerfully of flowers.

 The women approached with a deep blue robe for her, and she extended her arms, allowing them to put it on, then tie it shut. “You may turn around,” she told the steward.

 “Excellent,” Bluefingers said doing so, then striding around the tub, walking toward a door at the side of the room. “Quickly, now. We still have much to do.”

 Siri and the serving women followed, leaving the maroon room for one that was decorated in bright yellows. It held a lot more furniture, no bath, and a large plush chair in the center of the room.

 “His majesty is associated with no single hue,” Bluefingers said, waving to the bright colors of the room as the women led Siri to the plush chair. “He represents all colors and each of the Iridescent Tones. Therefore, his palace was crafted of a color that represents all things in one, then each room was decorated in a slightly different color.”

 Siri sat, and the women began to work on the nails of both her feet and hands. Another woman approached with a hairbrush. She began to comb out the snarls that had come from the hearty washing, and Siri frowned.

 “Just cut it off,” she said.

 They paused, uncertain.

 “Vessel?”

 “Cut off the hair,” she said.

 Bluefingers gave them permission, and a few snips later, her hair was in a bunch on the floor. Then, Siri closed her eyes and focused.

 She wasn’t certain how she did it--the Royal Locks had always been part of her life. Altering them was like moving any other muscle to her--if a little more difficult. Leaning back in the chair, eyes closed, she was able to get the hair to grow.

 Siri felt the woman behind pause as the hair sprouted from her head and moved down to her shoulders. It made her feel hungry and tired, but it was better than letting the women fight snarls for hours. Siri wasn’t as good as Vivenna, not by far. Siri couldn’t keep her hair under control when she was distracted. Yet, she had trained herself to control it to some extent.

 Bluefingers watched her with a curious expression, his ledger held loosely in his fingers. “That is. . .fascinating,” he said. “The Royal Locks. We have waited quite some time for them to grace the palace again, my lady. You can change the color at will, then?”

 “Yes,” Siri said. Though most of the time, it changes at its own will. “And make it grow, if I wish. Is it too long?”

 “Long hair is seen as a sign of beauty in Hallandren, my lady,” Bluefingers said. “I know you keep it bound up in Idris, but here, long flowing hair is favored by many of the women--particularly the Gods.”

 Siri paused. Part of her, then, wanted to keep the hair short just out of spite. She was beginning to realize that such an attitude, however, would likely get her killed in Hallandren.

 So, instead, she closed her eyes and focused again, growing her hair. It had been shoulder length, but she extended it for several minutes, making it grow until it reached a length that it would hang all the way down her back.

 Siri opened her eyes.

 “Beautiful,” one of the younger serving women whispered, then flushed, immediately returning to her work on Siri’s toenails.

 “Very nice,” Bluefingers agreed. “I will leave you to the work here--I have a few things to be about--but will return shortly.”

 Siri nodded, and then sat in the chair, pensively letting the women work. Several women moved in and began to apply makeup while the others continued to work on Siri’s feet, hands, and hair.

 This wasn’t how she had imagined her wedding day. Of course, she hadn’t imagined much that was specific. Marriage had always seemed far off to her. Father had wanted to wait until the treaty deadline arrived to send Vivenna away, and out of respect to her, hadn’t planned to marry off any of the other children until then.

 Even after Vivenna left, Siri would have had a few years before a spouse was chosen for her to marry. Ridger, as the heir, would have been the priority. Fafen, as a monk, would probably marry another monk--but father would want to be involved in that process as well. Only after both situations had been settled would Father have turned toward his youngest.

 When she’d been very young, Siri had always insisted that she’d never get married. With the childish mindset of a young girl, she had been determined to grow up and raise horses, without such annoyances as a husband or children to demand her time. She’d grown out of that, but a piece of her felt a longing for such simple times.

 The truth was, she didn’t want to be married. Not yet. She was still a youth, in her own mind, even if her body had become that of a woman. She wanted to play in the hills and ride horses and tease her father. She wanted to think about what she wanted, and experience life more, before she was forced into the responsibilities of child-bearing.

 Fate had taken that opportunity away from her. Now, she was faced not only by the imminent prospect of going to a man’s bed, but it was a man with whom she couldn’t speak, and a man who could kill her--it seemed--for so much as sneezing at the wrong time.

 She knew the physical requirements of what would involved--she could thank Mab the cook for some candid discussions on that point--but emotionally, she just felt petrified. Everything was all wrong. She wanted to run, hide, flee as far as she could.

 Did all women feel this way, or was it only those who were washed, cleaned, and sent to please a deity with the power to destroy nations?

 Eventually, Bluefingers returned to the room, his serving boy following obediently. Another person entered behind him, an elderly man in the blue and silver clothing Siri was beginning to associate with those who served the God King.

 But. . .Bluefingers wears brown, Siri thought, frowning. Why is that?

 “Ah, I see that my timing is perfect,” Bluefingers said as the women finished. They retreated to the sides of the room, heads bowed slightly.

 Bluefingers nodded to the elderly man. “Vessel, this is one of the palace healers. Before you are taken to the God King, you will need to be inspected to determine if you are really a maiden, and to ensure that you don’t have certain diseases. It’s really just a formality, but one that I’m afraid I must insist upon. However, in consideration of your bashfulness, I did not bring the young healer I had originally assigned to the job, and instead brought this older gentlemen. I assume this will make you more comfortable?”

 Siri sighed, but nodded. Bluefingers gestured toward a padded table on the side of the room, then he and his serving boy turned around.

 Siri undid her robe and went to the table, lying down to continue what was proving to be the most embarrassing day of her life.

 It will only get worse, she thought as the doctor doing his examination. Susebron, the God King.

 Awesome, terrible, holy, majestic. He had been stillborn, but had Returned. What did that do to a man? Would he even be human? Would he be some monster, terrible to behold as well as contemplate? He was said to be eternal, but obviously his reign would end sometime, otherwise he wouldn’t need an heir.

 She shivered to herself, partially wishing it would just be over with. Partially relieved for anything that stalled for just a little longer, even something as humiliating as the doctor’s prodding.

 Eventually, the doctor completed his examination, and Siri quickly did up her robe again, standing.

 “She is quite healthy,” the healer said to Bluefingers. “And most likely still a maiden. She has a very strong Breath, as well.”

 Siri paused. How could he tell. . . .

 And then she saw it. She had to look very closely, but the yellow on the floor around the surgeon looked a tad brighter than that more distance. She felt herself pale, though the nervousness had already made her hair as white as it went.

 The doctor is an Awakener, she thought. There is an Awakener here, in this room. And he touched me.

 She shivered. It was wrong to take the Breath from another person, even if they gave it freely. It left them unconnected to life, dimmer of spirit and soul. It was the ultimate in arrogance, the complete opposite of Idris philosophy. Others in Hallandren simply wore bright colors to draw attention to themselves, but Awakeners. . .they stole the life from human beings, and used that to make themselves stand out.

 Use of Breath was one of the main reasons that Royal line had moved to the highlands in the first place. Modern day Hallandren subsisted on the basis of extorting its people out of its Breath. The product of such extortions was the man who now stood speaking with Bluefingers.

 Siri stood, feeling more naked now than she had been when unclothed. What could this Awakener tell about her, because of his unnatural life force? Was he tempted to steal Siri’s BioChroma? She tried to breathe as shallowly as possible, just in case.

 Eventually, Bluefingers and the terrible doctor left the room. The women approached to undo her robe once again, some bearing undergarments.

 He will be worse, she realized. The King. He’s not just an Awakener, he’s Returned. He needs to suck the Breath from people in order to survive.

 Would he take away her Breath? Bluefingers had already explained that the God King would see her as nothing. A mere insect. What was there to stop him from drawing away her Breath?

 No, that won’t happen, she told herself firmly. He needs me to provide him with a child of the Royal line. He won’t risk the safety of his child. He’ll leave me my Breath, if only until then.

 But. . .what about after the heir was born? What would happen to her when she was no longer needed?

 Her attention was drawn away from such thoughts as several serving women approached with a large bundle of cloth. A dress. No, a gown.

 Siri gasped despite herself. The only colored clothing she had owned had been intentionally drab. Good Idris women dressed in faded tans and blues--or, even better, white, usually linen or wool.

 There was nothing “drab” about this dress. It was a gorgeous construction of blue and silver. Siri waited quietly as the women put it on her. It was amazingly soft on her skin, and the many folds and curves flowed so majestically. As the women situated it on her body, she noticed that--oddly--that it laced up the side, instead of the back. It had an extremely long train, and sleeves that were so long that if she put her arms down at the sides, they extended several feet below her hands.

 It took several minutes for the women to get the ties done up right, the folds situated correctly, and the train arranged behind her. All this so that it can be taken off again in a few minutes, Siri thought with a detached sense of cold irony. Once it was on properly, another woman approached with a mirror.

 Siri froze.

 Where had all that color come from? The delicately red cheeks, the mysteriously dark eyes, the blue on the top of her eyelids? The deep red lips, the almost glowing skin? The gown shone silver upon blue, bulky yet beautiful, with ripples of deep, velvet cloth.

 It was like nothing she’d seen in Idris. It was more amazing, even, than the colors she’d seen on the people in the city. Staring at herself in the mirror, Siri was almost able to forget her worries.

 “Thank you,” she whispered.

 That must have been the right response, for several of the serving women smiled, glancing at each other. Several took her hands, moving much more respectfully now than when they’d first rushed her from the carriage. Siri strode forward, train rustling behind her. She turned, and the women curtseyed one at a time, heads bowed.

 She turned forward, and the last two--the ones leading her--opened a door, then gently pushed her out into the hallway beyond. Siri stepped out of the yellow room, and the women remained inside, then closed the door behind her.

 The hallway was of the deepest black. She’d almost forgotten how dark the stone walls of the palace were. The hallway was empty, save for Bluefingers, who stood waiting for her with his ledger and pen. He smiled at her, bowing his head in respect.

 “The God King will be pleased, Vessel,” he said. “We are exactly on time--the sun only just set.”

 Siri turned from Bluefingers. Set into the dark hallway stones directly across from her was a large, imposing door. It was plated entirely with gold. Four lanterns set on the sides of the wall shone without colored glass, and they reflected light off the large door. She had no question as to who would lie beyond such an impressive gate.

 “This is the God King’s sleeping chambers,” Bluefingers said. “Or, at least, one of his sleeping chambers. Now, my lady, you must understand. Please do nothing to offend the King. You are here at his sufferance, and are here to see to his needs. Not mine, not your own, and not even that of our kingdom.”

 “I understand,” she said quietly, heart beating faster and faster.

 “Thank you,” Bluefingers said. “Now, it is time to present yourself. Enter the room, then remove your dress and underclothing. Bow yourself to the ground before the King’s bed, touching your head to the floor. When he wishes for you to approach, he will knock on the side post, and you may look up. He will then wave you forward.”

 She nodded.

 “Just. . .try not to touch him too much.”

 Siri frowned, clenching and unclenching her increasingly nervous hands. “How exactly am I going to manage that? We’re going to have sex, aren’t we?”

 Bluefingers flushed. “Yes, I guess you are. This is something of new ground for me, my lady--I’ve only been palace steward for fifteen years, you see. The King. . .well, only a group of specially dedicated servants are supposed to touch him. My suggestion would be to avoid kissing, caressing, or doing anything else to the God King. Simply let him do to you what he wishes, and you should be safe.”

 Siri took a deep breath, nodding.

 “When you are finished,” Bluefingers said, “the King will withdraw. Take the bed linens and burn them in the hearth. As the Vessel, you are the only one allowed to handle such things. Do you understand?”

 “Yes,” Siri said, growing increasingly anxious.

 “Very well then,” Bluefingers said, looking almost as nervous as she was. “Blessings of the First Returned upon you, child, and good luck.” With that, he reached forward and pushed the door open.

 Oh, Austre, God of Colors, she thought, heart pounding, hands sweating, growing numb.

 Bluefingers pushed her lightly on the back, and she stepped into the room.

Warbreaker

Chapter Seven

 The door shut behind her.

 A large fire growled in a hearth to her left, bringing a shifting orange light to the large room. The black walls seemed to draw in and absorb the illumination, however, making deep shadows at the edges of the room.

 Siri stood quietly in her ornate velvet dress, heart thumping, brow sweating. To her right, she could make out a massive bed, with sheets and covers of black to match the rest of the room’s decoration. However, the bed appeared unoccupied. Siri peered into the room, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

 The fire crackled, throwing a flicker of light across a large, throne-like chair sitting beside the bed. It was occupied by a figure wearing black, bathed in darkness. He watched her, eyes twinkling, unblinking in the firelight.

 Siri gasped slightly, casting her eyes downward, her heartbeat surging. Bluefingers’ words from before ran through her mind. The attendant had seemed so worried that she’d provoke the God King, thereby getting herself--and maybe Bluefingers himself--executed.

 Vivenna should be here instead of me, Siri thought. Why didn’t Father sent her? She was the one trained in politics! My first reaction is STILL to do something obstinate, just because I’ve been told not to.

 She kept that impulse inside, however. Regardless of the reasons, Vivenna had not been sent. Siri was the one standing before the Hallandren king, and she was the one upon whom Idris relied. That meant pleasing this God as best she could.

 Closing her eyes, her breaths coming more quickly, she pulled nervously at the strings on the side of her dress. She worked, hands slick with sweat as she tried to work around her long sleeves and undo the strings on the dress. Was she taking too long? Would his anger be riled?

 When she finally got the strings undone, the garment fell away with surprising ease--though, she could now see that it had been constructed with that goal in mind. She dropped the dress to the floor. Paused, then forced herself to pull off undershift, leaving her naked. Then, she quickly knelt on the cold stone floor, heart thudding in her ears as she bowed, forehead touching the floor.

 The room fell quiet, save for the crackling hearth. The fire wasn’t really necessary in the Hallandren warmth, but she was glad for it, unclothed as she was.

 She waited, hair pure white, arrogance and stubbornness discarded, naked in more than one way. This is where she ended up--this is where all her ‘independent’ sense of freedom came to a halt. No matter what she claimed or how she felt, in the end, she’d had to bow to authority. Just like anyone else.

 Her hair streamed down her back, bunching up around her neck, covering her up some small amount. She gritted her teeth, imagining the God King sitting there, watching her kneel subservient and naked before him. She hadn’t seen much of him, other than to notice his height--he was a good foot taller than most other men she’d seen, and was wider of shoulders and more powerful of build as well. Not a towering giant, but a man built on a slightly larger scale. More significant than other, lesser men.

 He was Returned.

 Being Returned in and of itself wasn’t a sin. After all, Returned came in Idris too--like the one she remembered as a child. There had been others, too, though they hadn’t come in her home village. Her father had usually traveled to the place where the event happened, visiting the individual who came back.

 In Idris, her people took the Returned in, fed them, and rejoiced that Austre God of Colors had sent them back for a short time to say farewell to their family. The Idrian Returned did not last long, however. After about a week, the life simply. . .faded from them.

 The Hallandren people, however, kept the Returned alive, feeding them on the souls of peasants, tearing away the Breath of hundreds of people each year. . . .

 Don’t think of that, Siri told herself forcefully. Yet, as she tried to clear her mind, the God King’s eyes returned to her memory. Those black eyes, which had almost seemed to glow in the firelight. She could feel them on her still, watching her, as cold and black as the stones upon which she knelt. He’d looked at her like a man inspected something interesting, but unimportant.

 The fire crackled. Bluefingers had said that the King would knock for her. What if she missed it? But, she didn’t dare glance upward--not after what she’d been told. She’d already met his gaze once, if by accident. She couldn’t risk upsetting him further.

 She just continued to kneel in place, elbows on the ground, back beginning to ache. Why doesn’t he do something?

 Was he was displeased with her? Was she not as pretty as he’d desired, or was he--perhaps--angered that she’d met his eyes, then taken too long to undress? It would be particularly ironic if she offended him when trying, so hard, not to be her usual uncaring self.

 Or, was it something else. He had been promised the eldest daughter of the Idris king, but had instead received Siri. Would he even know the difference? She and Vivenna both had the Royal Locks, and they were of similar build. Somehow, she doubted the great king of Hallandren would care that much which daughter had been sent, as long as he received his bride.

 The minutes passed, the room growing more dark as the fire burned away its logs.

 He’s toying with me, Siri thought. Forcing me to wait on his whims. He was the God King. Making her kneel in such an uncomfortable position was probably a message--one that showed who was in power. He would take her when he willed it, and not before.

 Siri gritted her teeth as the minutes passed. How long had she been kneeling? An hour, maybe longer. And still, there wasn’t a hint of sound--no knock, no cough, not even a shuffle from the God King.

 Perhaps it was a test, to see how long she would remain as she was. Perhaps she was just reading too much into things. Either way, she forced herself to remain in place, shifting only when she absolutely had to.

 Vivenna had the training. Vivenna had the poise and the refinement. But Siri, she had the stubbornness. One only had to look back at her history of repeatedly ignoring lessons and duties to realize that. With time, she’d even broken down her father, who had stopped growing displeased with her to save his own sanity.

 And so, she simply continued to wait--naked in the light of the coals--as the night wore on.

#

 Fireworks sprayed sparks up in a fountain of light. Some fell close to where Lightsong was sitting, and they blazed with an extra, frenzied light until they died away.

 He reclined on a couch in the open air, watching the display. Servants waited around him, complete with parasols, a portable bar, wet towels to rub his face and hands should he feel the need, and a host of other luxuries that--to Lightsong--were simply commonplace.

 He watched the night’s fireworks with mild interest. The firemasters--the men who had designed the fireworks--stood in a nervous cluster near his position. Beside them were a minstrels that Lightsong had called for, yet hadn’t yet asked to perform. While there were always entertainers in the Court of Gods for the Returned to enjoy, this night--as the wedding night of their God King--was even more extravagant.

 Susebron wasn’t in attendance himself, of course. Such festivities were beneath him. Lightsong glanced to the side, where the King’s palace rose above the Court of Gods. All of palaces formed a ring--God King’s own palace at the head--each one with a patio and balcony facing the central area. So, Lightsong basically sat in the front yard of his palace, though that yard also happened to be part of the massive courtyard shared by the other palaces.

 Another firefountain sprayed into the air, throwing shadows across the courtyard. Lightsong sighed, accepting another fruited drink from a servant. The night was cool and pleasant, fit for a God. Or Gods. Lightsong could see other pavilions set up in front of other palaces. Between them, different groups of performers cluttered the sides of the courtyard, waiting for their chance to please one of the Returned.

 The fountain ran low, and the firemasters looked toward him, smiling hopefully by torchlight. Lightsong nodded with his best benevolent expression. “More fireworks,” he said, waving to them. “You have pleased me.” This caused the three men to whisper in excitement and wave for their assistants.

 As they set up, a familiar figure wandered into Lightsong’s ring of torches. Llarimar wore his priestly robes, as always. Even when he was out in the city--which was where he should have been this night--he represented Lightsong and his priesthood.

 “Scoot?” Lightsong asked, sitting up.

 “Your grace,” Llarimar said, bowing.

 “What are you doing here?” Lightsong said. “You should be out in the city, with your family.”

 “I just wanted to check on you, your Grace. To make certain everything was to your liking with the servants and the festivities.”

 Lightsong rubbed his forehead. “You’re giving me a headache, Scoot.”

 “You can’t get headaches, your grace.”

 “So you’re fond of telling me,” Lightsong said with a sigh, waving for a servant to bring his priest a stool. “How are things outside the holy prison?”

 Llarimar frowned at the choice of words, but didn’t comment on them. “His Excellency’s wedding celebrations are quite fantastic,” he said, adjusting his spectacles as another fountain of sparks began to spurt in the courtyard before them. “The city hasn’t seen a festival this grand in decades.”

 “Then you should be out enjoying it.”

 “I just--”

 “Scoot,” Lightsong said, giving the man a pointed look, “if there’s one thing you can trust me to do competently on my own, it’s enjoy myself. I will--I promise in all solemnity--have a ravishingly good time drinking myself to excess and watching these nice men light things on fire. Now go be with your family.”

 Llarimar paused, then stood, bowed, and withdrew.

 That man, Lightsong thought, sipping his fruity drink, takes his work far too seriously.

 The concept amused Lightsong for some reason, and he leaned back, enjoying the fireworks a bit more. However, he was soon distracted by the approach of someone else. Or, rather, a group of someone elses. Lightsong sipped his drink again, his mood souring.

 The newcomer was beautiful. She was a Goddess, after all. Dark black hair, pale skin, lush and curvaceous body. She wore far less clothing than Lightsong did--but, then, that was common for most of the Court’s Goddesses. Her thin gown of green and silver was split on both sides, showing hips and thighs, and the neckline was draped down so low that very little was left to imagination.

 Blushweaver the Beautiful, Goddess of Honesty.

 She was trailed by about thirty servants, not to mention her high priest and a good six lesser priests. These would only be the attendants she’d seen fit to bring with her from her pavilion for a short stroll across the courtyard. The firemasters grew excited, noticing that they now had not one, but two divine attendants. The apprentices went about in a flurry of motion, setting up another series of firefountains. A group of Blushweaver’s servants rushed forward, carrying an ornate couch, which they set on the grass beside Lightsong’s.

 Blushweaver lay down with customary litheness, crossing perfect legs and resting on her side in a seductive, lady-like pose. The orientation left her capable of watching the fireworks should she wish, but her attention was obviously focused on Lightsong.

 “My dear Lightsong,” she said as a servant approached with a bunch of grapes. “Aren’t you even going to acknowledge me?”

 Here we go, Lightsong thought with resignation. “My dear Blushweaver,” he said, setting aside his cup and lacing his fingers before him. “Now why would I go and do something rude like that.”

 “Rude?” she asked, amused.

 “Of course. You obviously make quite a determined effort to draw attention to yourself--the details are magnificent, by the way. Is that makeup on your thighs?”

 She smiled, biting into a grape. “It’s a kind of paint, my dear. Light-colored, almost powdery. The designs were drawn by some of the most talented artists in my priesthood.”

 “My compliments to them,” Lightsong said. “The patterns certainly draw the eye. And, they are a point unto my argument. You need no acknowledgement, my dear. Your mere presence is its own acknowledgement. Were I to go so far as to point out your display, then I would simply be undermining it. It would be like. . .shouting encouragement to the puppeteer as he gives his show.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “But, didn’t your very explanation do just that?”

 “Only because you forced my hand, my dear,” Lightsong said as the fireworks went off again. With two Gods and their auras, the colors of the sparks grew quite powerful indeed. Some sparks on the far side, however, fell too far from the Returned auras. These were dull and weak by comparison--as if their fire itself were cool and insignificant enough that it could be picked up and tucked away.

 “I see,” Blushweaver said, eyeing the fireworks. “You seem captivated by the fire show. Is it that much more fascinating than I?”

 “Not at all. It simply seems far less likely to burn me.”
 Blushweaver smiled. “Then you admit that you find me beautiful?”

 “Of course. Why, my dear, you’re positively rank with beauty. You’re literally part of the definition of the word--it’s in your name somewhere, I do believe.”

 “My dear Lightsong, I do believe that you’re making sport of me.”

 “I never make fun of ladies, Blushweaver,” Lightsong said, picking up his drink again. “Mocking a woman is like drinking too much wine. It may be fun for a short time, but the hangover is hell.”

 Blushweaver paused. “But we don’t get hangovers.”

 “Yes, of course. And that, my dear, is why I had to mock you. Please forgive me. It was but an inevitability forced on an unwilling servant.”

 Blushweaver opened her mouth to reply, then closed it, obviously thinking through that last bit of logic. “Sometimes,” she finally said, “I’m not certain when you are being silly and when you’re being serious, Lightsong.”

 “Well, I can help you with that one easily enough,” he said. “If you ever think I’m being serious, then you can know that you’ve been working too hard on the problem.”

 “I see,” she said, twisting on her couch so that she was face down. She leaned on her elbows with breasts pushed up between them, fireworks lighting her exposed back. “So, then. You admit that I’m captivating and beautiful. Would you then care to retire from the open festivities this evening? Find. . .other entertainments, perhaps?”

 Lightsong paused. Being unable to bear children didn’t stop the Gods from seeking intimacy, particularly with other Returned. In fact, from what Lightsong could guess, the impossibility of offspring only increased the laxness of the Court in these matters. Many a God took mortal lovers--Blushweaver was known to have a few of her own among her priests. Distractions with mortals were never seen as infidelity among Gods.

 If such a thing could even really exist.

 Blushweaver lounged on her couch, supple, inviting. Lightsong opened his mouth, but then paused. In his mind, he saw. . .her. The woman of vision from his dreams, the face he’d mentioned to Llarimar. Who was she?

 Probably nothing. A flash from his former life, or perhaps simply an image crafted by his subconscious. Perhaps even, as the priests claimed, some kind of prophetic symbol of the future.

 That was his old life. He didn’t even remember it. Its images shouldn’t give him pause. Not when faced with perfection.

 “I. . .must decline,” he found himself saying. “I am, unfortunately, too lazy for such things.”

 “Too lazy for sex?” Blushweaver asked, rolling back onto her side and regarding him.

 “I’m really quite indolent. A poor example of a God, as I keep telling my high priest. Nobody seems to listen to me, however, so I fear that I must continue to be diligent in proving my point. Dallying with you would, unfortunately, undermine my entire basis for argument.”

 Blushweaver shook her head. “You confuse me sometimes, Lightsong. If it weren’t for your reputation, I’d simply presume you to be shy. How could you have slept with Calmseer, but consistently ignore me?”

 Calmseer was the last honorable Returned this city has known, Lightsong thought, sipping his drink. Nobody left has a shred of her decency. Myself included.

 Blushweaver fell silent, watching the latest display from the firemasters. The show had grown progressively more ornate, and Lightsong was considering calling the men off, lest they use all of their fireworks on him and not have any left should another God call upon them.

 Blushweaver didn’t make any moves to return to her own pavilion, and Lightsong let her be. He suspected that she hadn’t come simply for verbal sparring, or even to try and bed him--she had to know by now that he wasn’t likely to give in to that particular request.

 No, Blushweaver was always planning more than she first let on. In Lightsong’s experience, there was more depth to the woman than at first glance.

 Eventually, his hunch paid off. She turned from the fireworks, eying the dark palace of the God King. “We have a new queen.”

 “I noticed,” Lightsong said. “Though, admittedly, only because I was reminded several times.”

 They fell silent.

 “Have you no thoughts on the matter?” Blushweaver finally asked.

 “I try to avoid having thoughts. They lead to other thoughts, and--if you’re not careful--those lead to actions. Actions make you tired. I have this on rather good authority from someone who once read it in a book.”

 Blushweaver sighed. “You avoid thinking, you avoid me, you avoid effort. . .is there anything you don’t avoid?”

 “Breakfast.”

 Blushweaver didn’t react to this, which Lightsong found disappointing. She was too focused on the King’s palace. Lightsong glanced to the side, studying it. He often tried to ignore the large black building; he didn’t like how it seemed to tower over him.

 “Perhaps you should make an exception,” Blushweaver said, “and give some thought to this particular situation. We have a queen now.”

 “So? We’ve had queens before.”

 “Never one of the Royal line,” Blushweaver said. “At least, there hasn’t been one since the days of Klad the Usurper.”

 Klad. The man who had started the Manywar, the one who had used his knowledge of BioChromatic Breath to create a vast army of Lifeless and seize power in Hallandren. He had protected the kingdom, yet shattered it, driving the Royals into the highlands.

 Now they were back. Or, at least, one of them was.

 “This is a dangerous day, Lightsong,” Blushweaver said quietly. “What happens if that woman bears a child who isn’t Returned?”

 “Impossible,” Lightsong said.

 “Oh? You are that confident?”

 Lightsong nodded. “Of the Returned, only the God King can bear children, and they’re always stillborn.”

 Blushweaver shook her head. “The only word we have on that is from the palace priests themselves. Yet, I’ve heard of. . .discrepancies in the records. And, even if we don’t have to worry about that, there are plenty of other considerations. Why do we need a Royal to ‘legitimize’ our throne? Isn’t three hundred years of rule by the Court of Gods enough to make the kingdom legitimate?”

 Lightsong paused.

 “This marriage says that we still accept Royal authority,” Blushweaver said. “What happens if that king up in the highlands decides to take his kingdom back? Or, what happens if that queen of ours in there has a child by another man? Who is the heir? Who rules?”

 “The God King rules. Everyone knows that.”

 “He didn’t rule three hundred years ago,” Blushweaver said. “The Royals did. Then, after them, Klad did--and after him, Peacegiver. These things can happen quickly. By inviting that woman into our city, we could have initiated the end of Returned rule in Hallandren.”

 She fell silent, pensive.

 She’s planning something, Lightsong thought, studying the beautiful Goddess. It had been fifteen twenty years since her Return--which made her old, for a Returned. Old, wise, and incredibly crafty.

 Blushweaver glanced at him. “I don’t intend to find myself caught, surprised, like the Royals were when Klad seized their throne. Some of us are planning, Lightsong. You can join us, if you wish.”

 “Politics, my dear,” he said with a sigh. “You know how I loath them.”

 “You’re the God of bravery. We could use your confidence.”

 “At this point, I’m only confident that I’ll be of no use to you.”

 Her face grew impassive. Eventually, she sighed and stood, stretching, showing off her perfect figure once again. “You’ll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong,” she said. “You’re a God to this people.”

 “Not by choice, my dear.”

 She smiled, then over down and kissed him softly. “Just consider what I said. You’re a better man than you give yourself credit. You think I’d offer myself to just anyone?”

 He paused, then frowned. “Actually. . .yes. I do.”

 She laughed, turning as her servants picked up her couch. “Oh, come now! There’ve got to be at least three of the other Gods I wouldn’t think of letting touch me. Farewell, enjoy the party, and do try to imagine what our King is doing to our legacy up in his chambers right now.”

 She paused, glancing back at him. “Particularly if that imagining reminds you of what you just missed out on.” She winked, then trailed away.

 Lightsong sat back on his couch, then dismissed the firemasters with words of praise. As the minstrels began to play, he tried to empty his mind of Blushweaver’s ominous words.

 He failed.

Warbreaker

Chapter Eight

 Siri groaned, rolling over. Her back hurt, her arms hurt, and her head hurt. In fact, she was so uncomfortable that she couldn’t stay asleep, despite her fatigue. She sighed, sitting up, holding her head.

 She’d spent the night on the floor of the God King’s bed chamber--sleeping, kind of. Sunlight poured into the room, reflecting off of the marble floor where it wasn’t covered with rugs.

 Black rugs, she thought, sitting in the middle of the rumpled blue dress--which she’d used as both blanket and pillow during the night’s tossing and turning. Black rugs on a black floor, with black furniture. These Hallandrens certainly do know how to run with a motif.

 The God King wasn’t in the room. Siri glanced toward the oversized black leather chair where he’d spent much of the night. She hadn’t seen him leave, but she’d slept fitfully enough that she could remember glancing at the chair at one point and finding him gone.

 She yawned, then rose, pulling her shift out of the wadded mound of dress and putting it on. She pulled her hair out, flipping it behind her. Keeping it so long was going to take some getting used to. It fell down against her back, a contented blonde in color.

 She’d survived the night untouched. Somehow. She walked on bare feet over to the leather chair, running her fingers along its smooth surface.

 She’d been less than respectful during the night. She’d dozed off, falling out of her kneeling bow. She’d pulled her dress close for warmth, curling up on the hard stone floor. She’d even glanced over at the chair a few times. Not because of defiance or a disobedient heart; she’d simply been too drowsy to remember that she wasn’t supposed to look at the God King without his permission.

 Yet, he hadn’t ordered her executed. Bluefingers had had made her worry that the God King was volatile and quick to anger. Yet, if that were the case, then he had held his temper with her. Of course, what else was he going to do? The Hallandren had waited for decades to get a Royal princess to marry into their line of God Kings.

 She smiled. I do have a bit of power, she realized. He’s not the only one with an edge in this relationship. He couldn’t kill her--not until he had what he wanted.

 It wasn’t much. But, it did give her a bit more confidence. She walked around the chair, noting its size. Everything in the room was built as if to be just a little too large, skewing her perspective, making her feel shorter than she was.

 She rested her hand on the arm of the chair. She had spent most of the night--the moments when she’d been unable to sleep--thinking about her situation. Why hadn’t he decided to take her? She’d come up with dozens of possibilities, but none seemed more likely than the others.

 One thing was certain. For some reason, he hadn’t wanted her. And, oddly, she found herself feeling traitorously insecure. Why not? What was wrong with her? Wasn’t she desirable?

 Foolish girl, she told herself, shaking her head and walking over to the still-undisturbed bed. You should be grateful. You spent most of the trip here worrying about what would happen on your wedding night, and then when you get left alone, you complain about that too.

 She knew she wasn’t free. He would take her eventually--that was the point of the entire arrangement. But, it hadn’t happened last night. She smiled, yawning, and threw back the covers of the bed.

 Then, she climbed up into it and curled up in the covers, drifting off.

#

 Her next awakening was a great deal more pleasant than the first had been. Siri stretched, yawning, and then noticed something.

 Her dress, which she’d left sitting in a heap on the floor, was gone. Also, the fire in the hearth had been stoked--though why that was necessary was beyond her. The day was warm, and she’d kicked off most of the covers as she’d slept, eventually ending up with only a sheet to cover her.

 Only a sheet. . . . I’m supposed to burn the sheets, she remembered. That’s the reason they rebuilt the fire, despite the day’s heat.

 She sat up in her shift, alone in the black room. The servants and priests wouldn’t know that she’d spent the night on the floor. Unless, of course, the God King had told someone. However, she doubted that. If he were as high above everyone else as she’d been told, then he wasn’t likely to speak of intimate details to others.

 Slowly, she climbed out of bed and pulled the sheets free. She wadded them up, walked over, and threw them into the hearth flames. Then she watched them burn. She still didn’t know why the God King had left her alone. Until she knew, it seemed better to just let everyone assume that the wedding had been consummated, as expected.

 After the sheets were finished burning, Siri scanned the room, looking for something to wear. She found nothing. Sighing, she walked to the door, clothed only in her shift. She pulled it open, and jumped slightly. Two dozen serving women of varying ages knelt outside.

 God of Colors! Siri thought. How long have they been kneeling out here? Suddenly, she didn’t feel quite so indignant at being forced to kneel on the floor, waiting upon the God King’s whims. Apparently, she’d just done something similar to these women.

 After keeling for a few moments, the women stood up, heads bowed, and walked toward the room. Siri backed up, cocking her head as several of the serving women carried in large chests.

 They’re dressed in different colors from the day before, Siri thought. The cut was the same--divided skirts, like flowing trousers, topped with sleeveless blouses and small caps, their hair flowing out the back. Yet, instead of the blue and silver of the day before, the women were all wearing outfits of yellow and copper.

 As Siri tried to decide if the discrepancy was important or not, the women opened the trunks, removing various layers of clothing. All were of bright colors, and each was of a different cut. The women spread them out on the floor before Siri, then settled back on their knees, waiting.

 Siri paused. She’d grown up the daughter of a king, so she’d never really lacked. Yet, life in Idris was austere--both by intention and by necessity. She’d owned five dresses, which had been nearly been an extravagant number. One had been white, and the other four had been the same wan blue.

 Being confronted by so many colors and options felt overwhelming. She stood for a moment, trying to imagine how each would look on her. Many of them were dangerously low cut, even more so than the shirts the serving women were wearing--and those were already scandalous by Idris standards.

 Finally, hesitantly, Siri pointed at one outfit. It was the most like what she’d worn in Idris, if a bit less enveloping. It was dress in two pieces, red skirt and matching blouse. As Siri pointed, the serving women stood, some putting away the other outfits, others walking over to carefully remove Siri’s shift.

 Others approached with more appropriate undergarments, and in a few minutes, Siri was dressed. She was embarrassed to find that--while the clothing fit her perfectly--the shirt was designed to reveal her midriff. Still, it wasn’t as low cut as the others, and the skirt went all the way down to her calves.

 The silky red material was far lighter than the thick wools and linen she was accustomed to wearing. The skirt flared and ruffled when she turned, and Siri couldn’t be completely certain it wasn’t sheer. Standing in it, she almost felt as naked as she’d been during the night.

 That appears to be a recurring theme for me here, she thought wryly as the serving women backed away, bowing. Others approached with a stool for her, and she sat, waiting as the women wiped down her face with a pleasantly warm cloth while another brushed her hair. When that was done, they re-applied her makeup, then sprayed her with a few puffs of perfume.

 When she opened her eyes--perfume misting down around her--Bluefingers was standing in the room.

 “Ah, excellent,” he said, approaching, servant boy following obediently behind with ink, quill, and paper. “You’re up already.”
 Already? Siri thought. It has to be well past noon.

 Bluefingers looked her over, nodded to himself, then glanced at the bed, obviously checking to see that the linens had been destroyed.

 “Well,” then, he said, turning. “I trust that your servants will see to your needs, Vessel.” With that, he began to walk back out of the room, moving on the anxious feet of a man who felt he had far too much to do.

 “Wait!” Siri said, standing, jostling several of her serving women.

 Bluefingers paused. “Vessel?” he asked. The small, brown-robed man seemed nervous for some reason.

 Siri glanced away, uncertain how to express what she was feeling. “Do you know. . .what I’m supposed to do?”

 “Do, Vessel?” the scribe asked. “You mean, in regards to. . . .” he glanced at the bed.

 Siri flushed. “No, not that. I mean with my time. What are my duties? What is expected of me?”

 “To provide an heir.”

 “Beyond that.”

 Bluefingers frowned. “I. . .well, to be honest, Vessel, I really don’t know. I must say, your marriage has certainly caused a level of. . .disruption in the Court of Gods.”

 In my life, too, she thought.

 “In the past,” Bluefingers said, “the God King always married Goddesses from the Court. She, therefore, could live in her own palace and attend her own duties, watched by her own servants. She only needed to visit the palace at night.

 “You, however, have neither palace nor servants of your own. We could provide you with a palace--there are several that are unoccupied--but, you’re not Returned, so it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to have one in the Court.”

 He paused, eyeing her--as if all of this were her fault. “My lady, you are--I’m afraid--a bureaucratic nightmare.”

 Siri fell silent, flushing slightly, hair turning red.

 “Not that you’re to blame, of course,” Bluefingers said quickly. “But, then. . .well, I certainly wish I’d had more forewarning of this event.”

 “More forewarning?” Siri asked. “This marriage was arranged by treaty over twenty years ago!”

 “Yes, well, but nobody thought. . . .” he trailed off. “Ahem. Well, either way, we shall do our best to accommodate you here in the King’s palace.”

 What was that? Siri thought, trying to read his expression. Nobody thought. . .that the marriage would really happen? Why not? Did they assume that Idris wouldn’t keep it’s part of the bargain?

 “Anyway,” Bluefingers said, inching toward the door again, “if you have no further need of me. . . .”

 “I still don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Siri said, sitting down on the stool again. “Seeing to my. . .duties with the God King will take some of my time, but not all of it. Am I to sit here in the palace and stare at the fire all day?”

 Bluefingers chuckled. “Oh, Colors no! My lady, this is the Court of the Gods! You’ll find plenty to occupy your time. Each day, there are specific performers who are allowed to enter the Court and display their talents for their deities. You may have any of these brought to you for a private performance.”

 “Ah,” Siri said. “Can I, maybe, go horseback riding?”

 Bluefingers rubbed his chin. “I suppose we could bring some horses into the Court for you. Of course, we’d have to wait until the Wedding Jubilations are over.”

 “Wedding Jubilations?” she asked.

 Bluefingers frowned. “You. . .don’t know, then? Were you not prepared for any of this?”

 Siri flushed.

 “No offense intended, Vessel,” Bluefingers said quickly. “The Wedding Jubilation is a week long period in which we celebrate the God King’s marriage. During that time, you are not allowed to leave this palace. At the end of it, you will officially be presented to the Court of Gods.”

 “Oh,” she said. “And, after that, I can go out of the city?”

 “Out of the city!” Bluefingers said. “Vessel, you can’t leave the Court of Gods!”

 “What?”

 “You may not be a God yourself,” Bluefingers continued. “But you’re the wife of the God King. It would be far too dangerous for you to be let out of the Court. But, do not fret--anything and everything you might request can be provided for you.”

 Except freedom, she thought, feeling a bit sick.

 “I assure you, once the Wedding Jubilation is over, you will find little to complain about. Everything you could want is here--every type of indulgence, every luxury, every diversion. Each afternoon there is a specific performance planned--a larger event, which usually occurs in the courtyard or in the Court Arena. You can ask one of your servants to provide descriptions.”

 Siri nodded numbly, still feeling trapped.

 “Also,” Bluefingers said, holding up an ink stained finger. “If you wish, the Court of Judgment meets to provide decisions to the people. Full court meets once a week, though daily there are smaller judgments to be made, attended by only a few of the Gods. You aren’t to sit on the court itself, of course, but you will certainly be allowed to attend, once the Jubilation is over.

 “Of course, if none of this suits you, you may at any time request an artist of the God King’s priesthood to attend you. His Priesthood includes the devout and accomplished artists from all genres--whether you should desire music, painting, dance, poetry, sculpture, puppetry, play performance, sandpainting, or any of the lesser genres.”

 Siri blinked. God of Colors! she thought. Even being idle is daunting here.

 “But,” she said slowly, “there isn’t any of this that I’m required to attend?”

 “No, I shouldn’t think so,” Bluefingers said, frowning. “Vessel, you look displeased.”

 “I. . . .” How could she explain? Her entire life, she’d been expected to be something. And, for most of her life she’d intentionally avoided being that. Her insistence on avoiding what she was expected to do had come to form a great deal of who she was.

 Now, that was gone from her. She couldn’t disobey, otherwise she’d just get herself killed. More than that, she could get all of Idris into a war. For once in her life, she was willing to serve, to try and be obedient.

 But now, ironically, there didn’t seem to be anything for her to do. Except, of course, have a child and not antagonize the God King.

 “Very well,” she said with a sigh. “Where are my rooms? I’ll go there and situate myself.”

 “Your rooms, Vessel?” Bluefingers asked.

 “Yes. I assume I’m not to reside in this chamber itself.”

 “No, of course not,” Bluefingers said, chuckling. “The Conception room? Of course not.”

 “Then where?” Siri asked.

 “Vessel,” Bluefingers said. “This entire place is, in a way, yours. I don’t see why you’d need specific rooms. Ask to eat, and your servants will set up a table wherever you happen to be. If you wish to rest, they will bring you a couch or a chair. Seek entertainment, and they will fetch for you performers.”

 Siri paused, sitting on her stool. Suddenly, the strange actions of her servants--simply bringing her an array of colors to choose from where she was, then doing her makeup and hair right there--made more sense.

 “What of the people I brought with me?” Siri said.

 “They were taken to quarters outside the Court of Gods, Vessel. They aren’t dedicated servants, and it would not be proper for them to stay here. We could send for them, if you wish.”

 “No,” Siri said, sighing. “That won’t be necessary.” She thought for a moment, realizing that it was time to make good on the promise she’d made herself back in the carriage, the one regarding those men. There was no need for them to remain here, in Hallandren.

 She hesitated. They were her last connection to Idris. But. . .if she couldn’t even leave the Court of Gods, then what good would it be to force those soldiers to remain in the city.

 “Bluefingers,” she said. “I want you to tell the soldiers to leave and go back to Idris. They won’t want to abandon me, but tell them that I want them to go. Let them know I will be well cared for.”

 “As you wish, Vessel. And, if they refuse to go?”

 “Then bring them here, into the palace, and I will tell them to go myself. I don’t want them to have to wait in Hallandren, when they can’t really provide any kind of service for me. Better that they get to go home.”

 Bluefingers cocked his head, obviously finding something interesting about her comment. He covered his emotions quickly, however, simply bowing. “It shall be done, Vessel.”

 “Thank you.”

 “Then, if I might be excused. . . ?”

 Siri nodded distractedly, and Bluefingers finally withdrew, bustling away. Siri sat, thinking about how terribly alone she suddenly felt.

 Can’t focus on that, she thought. Instead, she turned to one of her serving women--a younger one, about Siri’s own age. “Well, that really doesn’t tell me what to spend my time on, does it?”

 The servant blushed quietly, bowing her head.

 “I mean, there seems to be a lot to do, if I want,” Siri said. “Maybe too much.”

 The girl bowed again.

 That’s going to get very annoying very quickly, Siri thought, gritting her teeth. Part of her wanted to do something shocking to try and get a reaction out of the servant, but she knew she was just being foolish. In fact, it seemed that many of her natural impulses and reactions wouldn’t work here in Hallandren. Back in Idris, she’s always preferred to spend time with Mab and the servants. Somehow she doubted that these women would be willing to treat her like a friend, rather than a superior.

 So, too keep herself from doing something silly, Siri stood and determined to examine her surroundings. She left the overly-black room behind, poking her head out into the hallway. She turned back to her servants, who stood obediently in a line behind her.

 “Is there any place I’m forbidden to go?” she asked.

 The one she was addressing shook her head.

 Fine, then, she thought. I’d better not end up stumbling upon the God King in the bath. She crossed the hallway, opened the door, then stepped into the yellow room she’d left behind the day before.

 The chair and bench she’d used had been removed, replaced by a group of yellow couches. Siri raised an eyebrow, then walked through the room and into the tub room beyond.

 Except, the tub was gone. She started, staring at the room. It was the one she remembered, with same red colorings. Yet, the sloped tile platforms with their inset tubs were gone. Now, looking, she could see that the entire contraption must have been portable, brought in for her bath, then removed.

 They really can transform any room, she thought with amazement. They must have chambers full furniture, tubs, and drapings, each of a different color, waiting upon the whims of their God.

 Curious, she left the tub-less room and moved in a random direction. Each room appeared to have four doors, one on each wall. After passing through just a few, she could see the pattern. A network of rooms, all connected by doors, each room decorated in a different color.

 There was variety beyond color, as well. Some were larger, others more rectangular. Some had windows to the outside, while others were locked in the middle of the palace. Yet, still, it was difficult to tell the difference between them. Endless rooms, pristine with their decorations following a single color’s theme. Soon, she was hopelessly lost--but it didn’t really seem to matter. Every room was, in a way, the same as any other.

 To test her theory, she turned to her servants. “I would like breakfast.”

 And it happened. Far faster than Siri would have thought possible. Several of the women ducked out, and returned with a stuffed green chair to match her current room. Siri sat down, waiting as a table, chairs, and finally food were produced as if out of nowhere. In less than fifteen minutes, she had a hot meal waiting for her.

 Hesitantly, she picked up a fork and tried a bite. It wasn’t until that moment that she realized how hungry she was. The meal was composed primarily of a group of spicy sausages mixed with vegetables. The flavors were, of course, far stronger than she was accustomed to. However, the more she ate the spicy Hallandren food, the more she found herself liking it.

 Hungry or not, it was strange to eat in utter silence. Siri was accustomed to either eating in the kitchens with the servants, or at the table with her father, his generals, and whatever local people or monks he had invited to his table that evening. It was never a silent affair.

 Yet, strangely, here in Hallandren--land of colors, sounds, and ostentation--she found herself eating alone, quietly, in a room that felt dull despite its bright decorations.

 Her servants watched silently. None of them spoke to her. Their silence was supposed to be respectful, she knew, but Siri just found it a little intimidating. She tried several times to draw them into conversation, but she only managed to get terse replies, and only when she asked direct questions.

 She chewed on a spiced caper. Is this what my life is to be from now on? she thought. A night spent feeling half-used, half-ignored by a husband who is too far above me to be a friend, then days spent in solitude--surrounded by people, yet somehow still alone?

 She shivered, her appetite waning. She sat down the fork, and her food slowly grew cold on the table before her. She simply stared at it, a piece of her wishing she’s simply remained in the comfortable, oversized black bed.

Warbreaker

Chapter Nine

 Three days later, unfortunately, Lightsong had to hear Petitions. It was annoying, since the Wedding Jubilation wasn’t done yet.

 Yet, even though the festivities weren’t completely over yet, the country needed their Gods. He knew he shouldn’t feel annoyed. He’d gotten three days off for the royal wedding--copiously unattended by either the bride or groom--and that was enough. Really, all he had to do was spend a few hours each day, looking at art and listening to the woes of the people. It wasn’t much. Even if it did seem to wear away at his sanity.

 He sighed, sitting back in his throne-like chair. He wore an embroidered cap on his head, matched by a lose robe of gold and red. The garment wrapped over both shoulders, twisted about his body, and was hung with ruffled golden tassels. Like all of his clothing, it was even more complicated to put on than it looked.
 It’s actually rather amusing, he thought, leaning his head on one hand, elbow on the throne’s arm rest. If my servants were to suddenly leave me, I’d be totally incapable of getting dressed.

 This room of his palace opened directly out onto the lawn--harsh weather was rare in Hallandren, and a cool breeze blew in off of the sea. He could feel it, smell its brine, even if he couldn’t see it. He closed his eyes, breathing in.

 He’d dreamed of the waters again last night. Llarimar had found that particularly meaningful.

 “Next petition, your grace,” Llarimar whispered from his side.

 Lightsong sighed, opening his eyes and sitting up straighter. Both edges of the room were lined with priests in their coifs and robes. Where had he gotten so many? Honestly, did any God need that many priests?

 He could see a line of people extending outside on the lawn, waiting their turn. They were a sorry, forlorn lot, several coughing from some malady or another. So many, he thought as a woman was led into the room by one of Lightsong’s priests. He’d been seeing petitioners for over an hour already. I guess I should have expected this, since I haven’t seen Petitioners in four days.

 “Scoot,” he said, turning to his priest. “Go tell those waiting people to sit down in the grass. There’s no reason for them to all stand there like that. This could take some time, yet.”

 Llarimar paused. Standing was, of course, a sign of respect. However, he nodded, waving over a lesser priest to carry the message.

 All of these people, waiting in line to see me, Lightsong thought. What will it take to convince the people that I’m useless as a God?

 What would it take to get them to stop coming to him? After five years of petitions, he honestly wasn’t certain if he could take another five.

 The newest petitioner approached his throne. She carried a child in her arms.

 Oh, no. . . . Lightsong thought.

 “Great One,” the woman said, falling to her knees on the carpet. “Lord of Bravery.”

 Lightsong didn’t speak.

 “This is my child, Halan,” the woman said holding the baby out. His blanket burst with a sharp blue color--two and half steps from pure--as it got close enough to Lightsong’s BioChromatic aura. With the child closer, Lightsong could easily see that it was suffering from a terrible sickness. It had lost so much weight that its skin almost seemed shriveled.

 Lightsong took a deep breath, gritting his teeth. The baby’s BioChromatic aura was so weak that it flickered like a candle running out of wick. It would be dead before the day was out. Perhaps before the hour was out.

 “The healers, they say he has deathfeaver,” the woman said. “I know that he’s going to die.”

 The baby made a sound--a kind of half-cough, perhaps the closest it could get to a cry.

 “Please, Great One,” the woman said. She sniffled, then bowed her head. “Oh, please. He was brave, like you. My Breath, it would be yours. The Breaths of my entire family. Service for a hundred years, anything. Please, just heal him.”

 Lightsong closed his eyes.

 “Please,” the woman whispered.

 “I cannot,” Lightsong said.

 Silence.

 “I cannot,” Lightsong said.

 “Thank you, my lord,” the woman finally whispered.

 Lightsong opened his eyes to see the woman being led away, weeping quietly, child clutched close to her breast. The line of people watched her go, looking miserable. Yet, they seemed more hopeful at the same time.

 One more petitioner had failed. That meant they would get a chance. A chance to beg Lightsong to kill himself.

 Lightsong stood suddenly, grabbing the cap off his head and tossing it asked. He rushed away, throwing open a door at the back of the room. It slammed against the wall as he stumbled out of the petition hall.

 Servants and priests followed immediately. He turned on them as they entered the room.

 “Go!” he said, waving them away. Many of them showed looks of surprise, unaccustomed to any kind of forcefulness on their master’s part.

 “Leave me be!” he shouted, towering over them. Colors in the room flared brighter in response to his emotion, and the servants backed down, confused, stumbling back out into the petition hall and pulling the door closed.

 Lightsong stood alone. He placed one hand against the wall, breathing in and out, other hand against his forehead. Why was he sweating so? He’d been through thousands of petitions during his time in the Court of Gods, and many had been worse than the one he’d just seen. He’d sent pregnant women to their deaths, doomed children and parents, consigned death to the innocent and the faithful.

 There was no reason to over-react. He could take it. It was a little thing, really. Just like eating the Breath of a new person every week. A small price to pay. . . .

 The door opened and a figure stepped in.

 Lightsong didn’t turn. However, he did speak. “What do they want of me, Llarimar?” he demanded. “Do they really think I’ll do it? Lightsong, the selfish? Do they really think I’d give my life up for one of them?”

 Llarimar was quiet for a few moments. “You offer hope, your grace,” he finally said. “A last hope, one they know probably won’t work. But, that is part of faith in you--the knowledge that someday, one of your faithful will receive a miracle.”

 “And if they’re wrong?” Lightsong asked. “I have no desire to die. I’m an idle man, fond of luxury. People like me don’t give up their lives, even if they do happen to be Gods.”

 Llarimar didn’t reply.

 “The good ones are all already dead, Scoot,” Lightsong said, looking up. “Calmseer, Brighthue: those were Gods who would give themselves away. The rest of us. . .we’re far more selfish. There hasn’t been a petition granted in what, three years?”

 “About that, your grace,” Llarimar said quietly.

 “And, why should it be different?” Lightsong said, laughing a bit. “I mean, we have to die to heal one of them. Giving up our Breath kills us. Doesn’t that strike you as ridiculous, Scoot? What kind of religion encourages its members to come and petition for their gods to die?”

 Lightsong shook his head. “It’s ironic, in a way. We’re Gods to them only until they kill us. And, I think I might know why it happens. It’s those petitions, being forced to sit day after day, knowing that you could save one of them--that you probably should, since your life isn’t really worth anything. That’s enough to drive a man mad. Enough to drive him to kill himself.”

 He smiled, glancing at his high priest. “Suicide by Divine manifestation. Very dramatic.”

 Llarimar was silent for a moment. “Shall I call the rest of the Petitions off for the day, your grace?”

 “Sure, why not,” Lightsong said, waving a hand. “They really need a lesson in theology. They should already know what a useless God I am, but they obviously don’t. Send them away, tell them to come back tomorrow--assuming that they are foolish enough to do so.”

 “Yes, your grace,” Llarimar said, bowing slightly.

 Doesn’t that man ever get mad at me? Lightsong thought. He, more than any, should know that I’m not a person to rely upon!

 Lightsong turned, walking away as Llarimar went back into the petition room. No servants tried to follow him--apparently, they were still cowed. Lightsong pushed his way through red-hued room after red-hued room, eventually finding his way to a stairwell and climbing up to the second floor.

 This floor was open on all sides, really nothing more than a large covered patio. He walked to the far side--the one opposite the line of people--and moved out onto his balcony.

 The breeze was stronger here, now that it didn’t have to curl through palaces and around corners to get to him. He felt it ruffling at his robes, bringing with it scents--scents that had had likely traveled hundreds of miles, across the ocean, twisting around palm trees and finally to the Court of Gods.

 He stood there for a long time, looking out over the city, toward the sea beyond. It wasn’t wanderlust that made him look that direction--he had no desire, despite what he said, to leave his comfortable home in the Court. He was not a man of jungles and exotic locals; he was a man of leisure and parties.

 But, sometimes he wished that he could at least wish to be something else.

 Blushweaver’s words still weighed upon him. You’ll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong.

 You’re a God to this people. . . .

 He was. Whether he wanted to be or not. That was the frustrating part. He’d tried his best to be useless and vain. And still they came.

 We could use your confidence. . .you’re a better man than you give yourself credit.

 Why did it seem that the more insistently he proved himself to be fool, the more the others seemed convinced that there was some hidden depth to him? Why couldn’t anyone accept that he was exactly what he appeared to be?

 They called him a liar in the same breath that they complimented his supposed inner virtue. Did no one understand that a man could be both likable and useless? Not every quick-tongued fool was a hidden hero.

 His BioChroma alerted him of Llarimar’s return long before footsteps did. The priest walked up onto the second floor, then joined Lightsong on the balcony. Llarimar folded his arms on the balcony railing--which, being built for Lightsong, was about a foot too high for the priest to lean against comfortably.

 “They’re gone,” Llarimar said.

 “Ah, very good,” Lightsong said lightly. “I do believe that we’ve accomplished something great today. I’ve run from my responsibly, screamed at my servants, and sat about pouting like a child. Undoubtedly, this will somehow convince everyone that I’m even far more noble and honorable than assumed. Tomorrow, there will be twice as many petitions, and I shall continue my inexorable march toward utter madness.”

 “You can’t go mad,” Llarimar said softly. “It’s impossible.”

 “Sure I can,” Lightsong said. “I just have to concentrate on it long enough. You see, it’s all in my head.”
 Llarimar shook his head. “I see you’ve been restored to your usual humor.”

 “But of course,” Lightsong said. They stood for a few more minutes, Llarimar making no move to offer chastisement or commentary on his God’s actions. Just like a good little priest.

 “Scoot, you’re my high priest,” Lightsong said.

 “Yes, your grace.”

 Lightsong sighed. “You really need to pay attention to the opportunities I’m giving you, Scoot. The proper, sarcastic response to my comment would have been ‘I’m your priest? Really? I couldn’t tell that, you idiot.’”

 “I apologize, your grace.”

 “Just try harder next time. Anyway, you know theology and the like, correct?”

 “I’ve studied quite a bit, your grace.”

 “Well the, what is the point--religiously--of having Gods that can only heal one person, then die? It seems a little counter-productive to me. Easy way to depopulate your pantheon.”

 Llarimar, leaned forward, staring out over the city. “It’s complicated, your grace. Returned aren’t just Gods--they’re men who died, but who decided to come back and offer blessings and knowledge. After all, only one who has died can have anything useful to say about the other side.”

 “True, I guess.”

 “The thing is, your grace, Returned aren’t meant to stay. We extend their lives, letting them bless us as is their intention in returning. But, they’re really only supposed to remain alive as long as it takes them to do the things they need to.”

 “Need to?” Lightsong said. “Seems a bit nebulous to me.”

 Llarimar shrugged. “Returned have. . .goals. Objectives. You knew of your goals before you decided to come back, but the process of jumping across the Iridescent Wave back to life leaves the memory fragmented. Stay long enough, and you’ll remember what it was you came to accomplish. The petitions. . .they’re a way of giving opportunities to help you remember.”

 “So, I’ve come back to save one person’s life?” Lightsong said, frowning, but feeling a little embarrassed. In five years, he’d spent relatively little time studying the theology that surrounded him. But, well, that was the sort of thing priests were for.

 “Not necessarily, your grace,” Llarimar said. “You could have come back to save one person, but that seems unlikely. More likely, there is information about the future or about the afterlife that you felt you needed to share. And, remember, it was the heroic way in which you died that gave you the power to return in the first place. It might related to that, somehow.

 “Anyway, once you feel that you’ve shared what you need to share, you can use the Petitions to find someone who deserves your Breath. Then, you can continue your journey across the Iridescent Wave.”

 Lightsong didn’t respond immediately. “And, if I don’t believe?”

 “In what, your grace?”

 “In any of it,” Lightsong said. “That Returned are gods, that these visions are anything more than random imaginings of my brain. What if I don’t believe that I had any purpose or plan in Returning?”

 “Then maybe that’s what you came back to discover,” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong paused. “So. . .wait. You’re saying that on the other side--where I obviously believed in the other side--I realized that if I Returned I wouldn’t believe in the other side, so I came back with the express purpose of discovering faith in the other side, which I only lost because I Returned in the first place?”

 Llarimar paused. Then, he smiled. “Breaks down a little bit in the face of logic, doesn’t it?”

 “Yeah, a little bit,” Lightsong said, smiling back. He turned, eyes falling on the God King’s palace, standing like a monument above the other structures in the Court.

 “What do you think of her?” Lightsong asked.

 “The new queen?” Llarimar asked. “I haven’t met her, your grace. She won’t be presented to us for another few days.”

 “Not the person. The implications.”

 Llarimar paused. “Your grace. That smells of an interest in politics!”

 “Blah blah, yes, I know. Lightsong is a hypocrite. I’ll do penance for it later. Now answer the blasted question.”

 Llarimar smiled. “I don’t know what to think of her, your grace. The Court twenty years ago thought bringing a Royal daughter here was a good idea.”

 Yes, Lightsong thought. But those Gods are mostly dead now, passed on, their Breath left to heal one of their followers. The Gods who had made the treaty had expected that melding the Royal line back into the leadership of Hallandren had been a good idea.

 But, the people who had planned how to deal with her arrival were gone now. They’d left inferior replacements.

 “The full court meets in judgment tomorrow, doesn’t it?” Lightsong said idly, still looking at the black palace.

 “Yes, your grace.”

 “Contact Blushweaver,” Lightsong said. “See if I can share a box with her during the judgments. Perhaps she will distract me from the arguments below. You know what a headache politics gives me.”

 “You can’t get headaches, your grace.”

 Lightsong stood for a few moments. In the distance, he could see the rejected petitioners trailing out of the gates, returning to the city, leaving their Gods behind.

 “Could have fooled me,” Lightsong said quietly.

Warbreaker

Chapter Ten

 “But, surely we can bend the rules a little bit,” Siri said, walking quickly beside Tridees.

 Tridees eyed her. The priest--high priest of the God King--would have been tall even without his elaborate head dress. With it, he seemed to tower over her like one of the Returned.

 Well, a spindly, obnoxious, disdainful Returned.

 “An exception?” he asked with his droll Hallandren accent. “No, I do not think that will be possible, Vessel.”

 “I don’t see why not,” Siri said as a servant pulled open the door in front of them, allowing them to leave a green-colored room and pass into a blue one. Tridees respectfully let her pass through the doorway first, though she could see from his expression that he was a bit displeased that he had to do so.

 Well, she thought. If he finds that displeasing, he should try spending an entire week cooped up in a stone palace with nobody to talk to but mute servants, disdainful priests, and overworked scribes.

 Siri ground her teeth, trying to think of another avenue of attack. Vivenna would be calm and logical, she thought. Explain the situation in a way that made sense, so that the priest listened to her. Siri took a deep breath, trying to ease the red from her hair and the frustration from her attitude.

 It didn’t work. Still, she forced her voice to be calm as she spoke. “Look. Couldn’t I, maybe, just go on one trip outside? Just into the Court itself.”
 “Impossible,” Tridees said. “If you feel lacking for entertainment, why not have your servants send for minstrels or jugglers? I’m sure they could keep you occupied.” And out of my hair, his tone seemed to imply.

 Siri ground her teeth. Couldn’t he understand? It wasn’t simply lack of something to do that frustrated her, it was the fact that she couldn’t leave. It was that she shouldn’t see the sky. Couldn’t feel free, running away from walls and locks and rules.

 Barring that, she would have settled for someone to talk to. “At least let me meet with one of the Gods. I mean, really--what is accomplished by keeping me locked up like this?”

 “You’re not ‘locked up’, Vessel,” Tridees said. “You are observing a period of isolation in which you can dedicate yourself wholly to your new husband. It is an ancient and worthy ritual, one that shows respect for the God King and his monarchy.”

 “Yes, but this is Hallandren,” Siri said. “It’s the land of laxness and frivolity! Surely you can see your way to making an exception this time.”

 Tridees stopped up short, giving her an indignant stare. “We do not make exceptions in matters of religion, Vessel. I must assume that you are testing me in some way, for I find it hard to believe that anyone worthy of touching our God King could harbor such vulgar thoughts.”

 Siri cringed slightly. Four days in the city, she thought, and I’ve already started letting my tongue get me into trouble again.

 That was something she should have learned from Vivenna. But, Siri had never been good at dealing with people. She didn’t dislike people--she loved to talk to them, spend time with them, laugh with them. However, she couldn’t make them do what she wanted, not in the way that a politician was supposed to be able to do.

 They continued their walking. This day, Siri wore a long, flowing brown skirt that covered up her feet and had a train that trailed behind her. The priest was wearing golds and maroons--a color matched by the servants. It still amazed her that everyone in the palace had so many costumes to wear, even if they were identical save for the colors. It was getting to the point that Siri had begun wondering if she were committing some unseen faux pas by dressing in different colors from the rest of them. Yet, if that were the case, why would the serving women offer her such a variety?

 She sighed, shaking her head and reigning in her frustration. She knew that she shouldn’t let herself get annoyed with the priests--they already didn’t seem to like her for some reason, and getting snappy wouldn’t help. It was just that the last few days had been so dull. Trapped in the palace, unable to leave, unable to find anyone to talk to, she found herself nearly going mad.

 But, there would be no exceptions. Apparently.

 “Will that be all, Vessel?” Tridees asked, pausing beside a door. It almost seemed like he found it a chore to remain civil toward her.

 Siri sighed, but nodded. The priest bowed, then opened the door and quickly rushed away, like a rodent suddenly freed from a trap.

 Siri watched him go, tapping her foot, arms folded. Her servants stood arrayed behind her, silent as always. Talking to them usually proved even more frustrating than trying to talk with the priests. Considered finding Bluefingers, but. . .no. He always had so much to do, she felt bad distracting him--even if he was far more civil than the priests.

 That left her with nothing. Sighing again, she motioned for her servants to prepare the evening meal. Two fetched a chair from the side of the room, and Siri sat back, resting as the meal was gathered.

 The chair was plush, but it was still difficult to sit in a way that didn’t aggravate one of her aches or cramps. Each of the last four nights, she had been forced to kneel on the floor, naked, until she finally grew so drowsy that she drifted off. Sleeping on the hard stone in awkward poses had left a dull, almost ever-present, pain in her back and neck.

 Each morning, she moved to the bed once the God King was gone. Then, when she awoke the second time, she burned the sheets. After that, she chose her clothing--there was a new array each time, with no repeated outfits. She wasn’t sure where the servants got such a steady supply of clothing in Siri’s size, but it made her a little apprehensive about choosing daily costume. She knew that she’d likely never see any of the options again.

 After dressing, she was free--after a fashion. She couldn’t leave the palace, and she couldn’t really talk to anyone. She could be entertained, but that was about it. Then, each night she was bathed, then given a choice of luxurious gowns to wear into the bed chamber.

 As a matter of comfort, she had started requesting more and more ornate gowns, with more and more fabric, so that she could use them as better blankets when she slept. She often wondered what the dressmakers would think if they knew that their gowns were only worn for a few brief moments before being discarded to the floor, then eventually used as hybrid blanket/cushions.

 It was an odd way to live. She didn’t own anything, yet could have whatever she wanted--assuming it didn’t require her to leave the palace. Exotic foods, furniture, entertainers, books, pieces of art. . .anything she asked for was provided. And yet, when she was done, it was taken away. At the same time, she owned everything and nothing.

 She yawned. Even though she napped for a great portion of the day, the irregular sleep schedule tended to leave her feeling bleary-eyed and tired. The completely empty days didn’t help with that feeling much either.

 If only there were someone to talk to! she thought. In Idris, conversation had been easy to find. Usually, she’d spoken with servants, but in the highlands, there hadn’t been as much of a division between the lower class and the royalty. There just weren’t that many people to begin with, and so if you wanted company, you couldn’t be picky.

 Not so in Hallandren. The serving women respected her, served her, and obeyed her--but they wouldn’t talk to her. She’d already proven to herself that the priests and scribes weren’t interested. That accounted for everyone she interacted with.

 Well, except him.

 But, could she really call that interacting? The God King appeared to enjoy looking at her body, for he did enough of that every night. But, he’d never given her any indication that he wanted more from her. He simply let her kneel there, feeling those eyes of his watching her, dissecting her. That was the sum total of their marriage.

 The servants finished putting out her dinner, then lined up by the wall.

 Siri sighed, rising. It was getting late--almost time for her nightly bathing and preparation to be sent to the God King’s chambers.

 I’ll have to eat quickly, she thought, sitting at the table. After all, I wouldn’t want to be late for the evening’s ogling.

#

 A few hours later, Siri stood bathed, perfumed, and dressed before the massive golden door that led into the God King’s bed chamber. She breathed deeply, calming herself, anxiety bringing her hair to a pale brown. She still hadn’t gotten used to this part. The standing, waiting, before she went in.

 It was silly. She was well aware of what lay within those chambers. And yet, the anticipation--the fear--was still there. God King. His actions proved the power he had over her. One day, he would take her. It could come at any time. Part of her wished he’d just be done with it. The extended dread was even worse than the single evening of terror she’d felt on that first night.

 She shivered. Bluefingers--the only other person in the black hallway--stood beside her. Perhaps eventually he’d trust her to arrive at the bed chambers on time. However, each night so far, he’d come to check on the process, then escort her to the bed chamber.

 At least he hasn’t shown up while I’m bathing again. The warm water and pleasant scents should have been enough to let her relax --unfortunately, she tended to spend the entire experience worrying about either her impending visit to the God King, or about some male servant walking in on her.

 She glanced at Bluefingers.

 “A few more minutes, Vessel,” he said.

 How does he know? she thought. The man seemed to have a supernatural sense of time. She hadn’t seen any form of timepiece in the palace--neither sundial, metered candle, nor water clock. In Hallandren, apparently, Gods and queens didn’t worry about such things. They had servants to remind them of appointments.

 Bluefingers glanced at the door, then at her. When he saw that she was watching him, he immediately turned away. Siri frowned, noticing as he shuffled from foot to foot. Was that normal for him? He did tend to have an urgent temperament, but such anxiety seemed a little out of place.

 What does he have to worry about? she thought with annoyance, turning to stare at the door’s intricate gold designs. He’s not the one who has to go through this every night.

 “Do. . .things go well with the God King, then?” Bluefingers asked suddenly.

 Siri frowned.

 “I can see that you’re tired a lot of the time,” Bluefingers said. “I. . .guess that means you are very. . .active at night.”

 “I thought that’s what you wanted. Everyone wants an heir as soon as possible.”

 “Yes, of course,” Bluefingers said, wringing his hands a bit. “It’s just that. . .” he trailed off, then glanced at her, meeting her eyes. “You just might want to be careful, Vessel. Keep your wits about you. Even if you feel tired, you should try to stay alert.”

 Siri frowned, hair bleaching the rest of the way white. “You. . .make it sound as if I’m in danger,” she said softly.

 “What, danger?” Bluefingers said, glancing to the side. “Nonsense. What would you have to fear here, in the palace of a God? I was simply suggesting that you remain alert, should the God King have needs you should fulfill. Ah, see, now it’s time. Enjoy your evening, Vessel.”

 With that, he pushed open the door into the dark chamber. He placed a hand on her back, pushing her into the room. At the last moment, however, he moved his head up next to hers. “You should watch yourself, child,” he whispered. “Not all here in the palace is as it seems.”

 Siri frowned, turning, but Bluefingers just plastered on a false smile an pushed the door shut behind her.

 What in Austre’s name was that? she thought, pausing for what was probably too long a time as she stared at the door. Finally, she sighed, turning away. The usual fire crackled in the hearth, but it was smaller than normal. That left the room a bit chilly.

 He was there. Siri didn’t need to look to see him. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, she could notice that the fire’s colors--blue, orange, even black--were far too true, far too Vibrant. Her gown, a brilliant golden satin, seemed to burn with its own inner color. Part of her wished for a well-lit room, where she could experience the full beauty of BioChroma.

 But, of course, that was not right. The God King’s Breath was a perversion. The creature who watched her was fed on the souls of his people, and the colors he created came at great expense.

 Shivering, Siri reached over and undid the side of her dress, then let the garment fall to pieces around her--the long sleeves slipping free, bodice falling forward, skirt and gown rustling as they dropped to the floor. She completed the ritual, sliding the straps of her shift off her shoulders, then dropping the garment to the floor beside the gown. She stepped free of both, then bowed herself down into her customary posture.

 Her back complained at the motion, and she ruefully contemplated another uncomfortable night. The least they could do, she thought with annoyance, is make certain the fire is large enough. Such things were, apparently, rarely necessary in Hallandren’s tropical weather. Yet, in the large stone palace, it could still get a little chilly. Particularly if one were naked.

 Focus on Bluefingers, she thought, trying to distract herself from the discomfort. What did he mean? Things are not what they seem in the palace?

 His ominous tone worried her. Was he referring to the God King and his ability to have her killed upon a whim? But, Bluefingers had already warned her about that --everyone had. She was well aware of the God King’s power. How could she forget it, with him sitting not fifteen feet away, watching from the shadows?

 No, that wasn’t it. Bluefingers’ warning seemed to refer to something else, something he felt he needed to say quietly. Watch yourself. . . .

 It smelt, unfortunately, of politics. Something Siri hadn’t been trained for--though she should have been. She gritted her teeth. If she’d paid more attention to the tutors, would she--perhaps--have been able to pick out a more subtle meaning to Bluefinger’s warning?

 As if I needed something else to be frustrated about, she thought. Vivenna wouldn’t have been annoyed. Knowing that, unfortunately, only made Siri more annoyed. If Bluefingers had something to tell her, why hadn’t he just said it?

 As the minutes passed, she thought about his comments again and again. They were like an insomniac, turning over repeatedly, unable to simply rest in her mind. Yet, at the same time, she felt too tired--too uncomfortable and cold--to really come to any conclusions. That only left her feeling more annoyed.

 Vivenna would have figured it out. In fact, Vivenna probably would have known instinctively why the God King hadn’t chosen to sleep with her. She would have fixed it the first night, rather than sitting and embarrassing herself time and time again.

 But, Siri was incompetent. She’d tried so hard to do as Vivenna would have. Siri tried to be the best wife she could, to serve Idris. She’d worked to be the woman that everyone expected her to be.

 But, she wasn’t. She couldn’t just keep doing this. She felt trapped in the palace. She couldn’t get the priests to do more than roll their eyes at her. She, apparently, couldn’t even tempt the God King to bed her.

 On top of that--if Bluefingers’ words meant what she suspected they did--then she could very well be in danger, and she couldn’t even understand why or how.

 In simpler terms, she was just plain frustrated.

 Groaning at her aching limbs, Siri sat up in the dark room and shoot a look at the shadowy form in the corner. “Will you please just get on with it?” she found herself snapping.

 Silence.

 Siri felt her hair bleach a terrible bone white as she realized what she’d just done. She stiffened, casting her eyes down, tiredness fleeing in the face of sudden anxiety.

 What had she been thinking? The God King could call servants to execute her. In fact, he didn’t even need that. He could bring her own dress to life, Awakening it, making it leap on her and strangle her. He could make the rug rise up and attack her. He could probably bring the ceiling down on her, if he chose. He could kill her in a dozen different ways, all without moving from his chair.

 Siri waited quietly, breathing quickly, anticipating the fury and retribution. But. . .nothing happened. Minutes passed.

 Finally, Siri looked up cautiously. The God King had moved, sitting up straighter, regarding her from his darkened chair beside the bed. She could see his eyes reflecting the firelight. She couldn’t see much of his face, but he didn’t seem angry. He just seemed cold.

 She almost cast her own eyes down again. However, she paused. If snapping at him wouldn’t provoke a reaction, then looking at him wasn’t likely to either. So, she turned her chin up and met his eyes, knowing full well that she was being foolish. Vivenna would never have provoked the man in such a way. She would have remained quiet and demure, either solving the problem or--if there was no problem--kneeling every night until her patience impressed even the God King of Hallandren.

 But, Siri was not Vivenna. She just had to accept that fact.

 The God King continued to look at her, and Siri found herself blushing. She knew she’d knelt before him naked four nights in a row, but now, looking at him seemed more embarrassing. Still, she didn’t back down. She watched him, forcing herself to stay awake as she knelt on the floor.

 It was difficult. She was tired, and the position was actually a bit less comfortable than bowing had been. Still, she managed to force herself to stay as she was, watching him as he watched her, as the hours passed.

 Eventually--at about the same time that he left the room every night--the God King stood up. Siri stiffened, shocking alert, but he didn’t move toward her. Instead, he simply walked to the door. He tapped quietly, and it opened for him, servants apparently waiting on the other side. He stepped out, and the door closed behind him.

 Siri waited, tensely, for a long while. No soldiers came to arrest her; no priests came to chastise her. Eventually, she just walked over to the bed and burrowed into its covers--savoring the warmth.

 The God King’s wrath, she thought drowsily, is decidedly less wrathful than reported.

 With that, she fell asleep.

Warbreaker

Chapter Eleven

 Vivenna--first child of Dedelin, King of Idris--gazed upon the grand city of T’Telir. It was the ugliest place she had ever seen.

 People jostled about in the streets, draped flagrantly in colors, yelling, and talking, and moving, and stinking, and coughing, and bumping. She pulled her shawl close, continuing her imitation--such that it was--of a woman of advancing years. She wore the shawl, and had lightened her hair to gray. She had worried that, without the discuses, she would have stood out. She needn’t have been concerned. Who could ever stand out in this mess of people?

 Still, she maintained the disguise. It was best to be safe. She had come--arriving in T’Telir just hours ago--to rescue her sister, not get to herself kidnapped.

 It was an insane plan. Vivenna still had trouble admitting to herself that she’d come up with it. Still, of the many things that her tutors had taught her, one remained foremost in her mind. A leader was someone who acted. Nobody else was going to help Siri, and so it came down to Vivenna.

 She realized that she was inexperienced. However, she hoped that understanding would give her something of an edge. Keep her from being too foolhardy. She was actually rather well prepared, all things considered. She had the best education and political tutelage that her kingdom could provide. She’d trained all of her life to avoid looking ostentatious or standing out. She could hide in a massive, unwieldy city like T’Telir.

 And massive it was. She’d read of the city, she’d even memorized city maps. And yet, none of that had prepared her for the sight, sound, scent, and colors of the city on market day. Even the livestock wore bright ribbons. Vivenna stood to the side of the road, stooped beside a building draped in flapping cloth. The fabric had been tied to the building, covering it in streamers.

 In front of her, a herdsman drove a small flock of sheep toward the market square. They had each been dyed a different color. Won’t that ruin the wool? Vivenna thought sourly. The different colors on the animals clashed so terribly that she had to look away.

 Poor Siri, she thought. Caught up in all of this, locked in the Court of Gods, probably so overwhelmed that she can barely think. Vivenna had been tutored all of her life about how to deal with the terrors of Hallandren. Though the colors sickened her, she had the fortitude to withstand them. How would little Siri manage?

 But, then, that was why Vivenna had come. She steeled herself against the colors, pulling her shawl closer. Where is that man? she thought. Peprin had yet to return from his scouting.

 But, there was nothing to do but wait, standing beside the building in the shadow of a large stone statue. The statue itself was one of many--they were all over the city. Carved in the shapes of men, the stone works had an exaggerated size--like Returned. They stood in all poses, armed with weapons and often dressed in colorful clothing which had been placed over the stonework. According to her lessons, the people of T’Telir found dressing the statues to be an amusing pastime, one that supposedly brought blessings from the Returned.

 A piece of Vivenna was awed to finally be able to study the D’Denir Celabrin, as the statues were called. Her tutors had spoken of them often. And yet, like so much else in Hallandren, looking at them reminded her of the kingdom’s excess and flamboyance. They had been commissioned to commemorate the end of the Manywar--an appropriate reason, even by Idris standards.

 However, in T’Telir, one or two celebratory statues weren’t good enough. They had to have thousands upon thousands of Denir. Lore said that the first ones had been commissioned by Peacegiver the Blessed, the Returned who had taken command of Hallandren at the end of the Manywar. Regardless of whether or not that were true, the number of statues had increased each year as new ones were commissioned and paid for by the Returned--whose money, of course, came from the people themselves.

 Excess and waste indeed, Vivenna thought, shaking her head.

 Eventually--finally--she noticed Peprin coming back down the street. She frowned as she saw that he was wearing some ridiculous contraption on his head--it looked a little like a sock, though much larger. It flopped down one side of his square face, and looked very out of place against his dull brown Idris traveling clothing.

 It was bright green.

 “Peprin?” she said as he approached, carefully keeping the annoyance out of her voice and her hair. “What is that on your head?”

 “It’s a hat,” he said, smiling.

 “I. . .can see that much.”.

 “The man in the market said they’re very popular,” Peprin noted. Tall enough to be lanky, Peprin was only a few years Vivenna’s senior. She’d known him for most of her life; Peprin had practically grown up in the palace itself. He was the son of Yarda, the king’s most trusted friend and general.

 Yes, she’d known Peprin for many years. That didn’t mean she’d ever come to understand him.

 “The hat is ridiculous, Peprin,” Vivenna said. “It makes you stand out.”

 “Really?” he said, not looking even a bit offended at the blunt comment. Sometimes, bluntness was too subtle for him. “I kind of thought it would make me blend in a little--you know, look like the locals.”

 “It doesn’t,” Vivenna said flatly, hair controlled to keep the red out of it.

 “Oh.” He stood thoughtfully for a moment, then pulled another wad of green cloth out of his pocket. “Does that mean I can keep the one I bought for you?”

 She closed her eyes and sighed. Why, of all people, did I bring Peprin with me?

 The answer to that, of course, was simple. He was the only one dumb enough to go along with a plan like this.

 That’s not fair, Vivenna thought, opening her eyes, chiding herself. Peprin isn’t dumb. He just. . .takes longer to figure things out than other people.

 And then he tends to figure them out wrong.

 “You should see the stuff they have in that market, Vivenna!” Peprin said. “This place. . .well, it’s strange, like everyone says. We should go out and get the others, let them come in an see. . . .”

 “No,” Vivenna said sharply. “We two already stand out enough. If we were to come traipsing in here with ten soldiers in tow, we’d--” she paused. “Wait. What money did you use to buy those hats?”

 Peprin shrugged. “What I brought with me. That’s another thing, Vivenna. Everything’s a lot cheaper here than buying it off the traveling merchants.”

 She closed her eyes. “Those are Idris coins, Peprin. If it gets out that someone is spending them. . . .”

 “Oh, don’t worry about that,” Peprin said, smiling at a pretty girl who walked by. Vivenna frowned. The hussy was--like most of the women in T’Telir--wearing practically no clothing. Blouses that revealed well below the neck, skirts well above the knees--some women even wore pants, just like men.

 “Anyway,” Peprin said, turning back to her. “I’ve seen lots of people from Idris here.”

 “What?” Vivenna said, forgetting herself and showing a bit of shock.

 “Sure,” Peprin said. “In the market. They were trading goods. I spoke to a few of them--didn’t tell them who I was, though. Don’t worry about that.”

 Vivenna frowned, tapping her foot. Coming from Peprin, any story could be a little. . .suspect. Still, he wasn’t the type to lie intentionally. He was as trustworthy a man as his father, and while he wasn’t himself a soldier, he was an accomplished woodsman. Plus, he was rather devoted to her. Often, during their youths, he’d brought her gifts from the forest. Generally, they’d been some animal he’d killed.

 In Peprin’s opinion, nothing showed affection like a hunk of something dead and bleeding on the table.

 “And the restaurant?” Vivenna asked.

 “Looks good enough,” Peprin said, taking off his hat and running a hand through his mop of black hair. Unfortunately, he replaced the hat. “Sure is hot here.”

 “Just by contrast,” Vivenna said. “You’re used to the highlands. This isn’t really that hot--my tutors spoke of deserts far worse than this. The restaurant. Did you see anyone suspicious there?”

 Peprin shook his head. “What kind of thing would be ‘suspicious’ in this city?”

 “I don’t know. You’re the one who insisted on scouting ahead.”

 “It’s always a good idea when hunting. Let one hunter go ahead. Less likely to scare away the animals.”

 “Unfortunately, Peprin,” Vivenna said, “people aren’t like animals.”

 “Oh, I know,” Peprin said. “Animals make more sense.”

 Vivenna sighed. However, she did notice that Peprin had been right on at least one count. She caught sight of a group of Idrians walking down the street, one pulling a cart that had probably once held farm goods. It surprised her that they would come so far. But, then, commerce hadn’t been particularly robust in Idris lately.

 Reluctantly, she closed her eyes and--using the shawl to hide the transformation--changed her hair from gray to white. Then, she moved the shawl to her shoulders instead. Now that she knew there were Idrians in town, it was unlikely that she would stand out. Trying to act like an old woman would be more suspicious than simply walking along the street.

 Still, it felt odd to be exposed. In Bevalis, she would have been recognized instantly. However, Bevalis had only a few thousand people in it--and it was extremely large by Idris standards. It wasn’t that the kingdom itself lacked people, they were just all spread out.

 No ports, she thought, nodding to Peprin and--gritting her teeth--joining the crowd and making her way toward the marketplace.

 The inland sea made all the difference. T’Telir was a prime port, and the dyes it sold--made from the Tears of Edgli, a local flower--made it a popular place of trade. She could see the evidence of such things all around her. Exotic silks and clothing, like the ridiculous hat Peprin had bought. Foodstuffs carried in fresh from cities along the coast. In Idris, the population had to be spread out to support farms and herds. In Hallandren--a country which controlled a good third of the coast of the inland sea--things could be different. They could burgeon. Grow.

 Get flamboyant.

 In the distance, she could see the plateau that marked the Court of Gods, most profane place beneath Austre’s colorful eyes. Inside its walls, within the God King’s terrible palace, Siri was being held captive. She would be the prisoner of Susebron himself, and Vivenna cringed every time she thought of what Siri must be going through.

 The God King would demand an heir. That was to have been Vivenna’s duty--her sacrifice for her people. She had been prepared, and understood what would have been required of her. Sending Siri instead was downright criminal.

 Vivenna gritted her teeth. Siri. In the God King’s chambers. Only a situation that dire could have persuaded Vivenna to do as she had.

 Which was what? She wandered down the street, eyes downcast, careful to not draw attention to herself. Getting away from Idris had been surprisingly easy. Who would suspect anything of Vivenna--she who had lived her life perfect, fulfilling all that was expected of her? Nobody questioned when she’d asked for food and supplies, explaining that she wanted to make emergency kits, should the city’s soldiers need to march. Then, she had proposed an expedition to the higher reaches to gather important roots to be used in poultices. Again, nobody had questioned. Who would think that Vivenna would take her procession not into the high fields, as proposed, but down into Hallandren?

 Peprin had been easy enough to persuade--though she had, of course, needed to tell him the truth. He trusted her. Perhaps too much. And, Peprin was himself trusted by many of the young men in Bevalis. With him on her side, she’d been able to gather a few select individuals to protect her and provide for her as they made the trek down from the highlands.

 Nobody had suspected. Her trip to the high reaches was supposed to have taken several days, perhaps even a week. When she didn’t return, her father would panic--but that was when her message to him would arrive, explaining where she had gone and why. Counting off the days, she realized that it would probably arrive this very evening.

 He wouldn’t be able to stop her. Any large-scale rescue force would be seen as a sign of war. Plus, by the time her father could get spies or soldiers to T’Telir, Vivenna planned to have accomplished her mission. If worst came to worst, she would simply go to the Court of Gods, explaining that there had been a mistake, and try to trade herself for Siri.

 However, that was a last resort. The God King was not to be trusted, and he would probably take Vivenna captive and keep Siri, thereby providing him with two princesses to provide pleasure instead of one. . . .

 Don’t think about that, Vivenna told herself, pulling her shirt closed a little more at the top--though, of course, it had a modest Idris neckline.

 No. Going empty-handed to the Court of Gods was her last option. The better method was the more difficult one: to try sneaking Siri out of the palace, and then offer herself up as a replacement. If she were very clever, she might be able to make it seem as if Siri had died of a disease. Then, Vivenna could arrive a short time later, claiming to have been sent officially to replace the princess who had died.

 Doing any of that, however, meant taking a few risks. The first of those was to be found in the market ahead. Lemks was her father’s head spy in Hallandren, a man who had lived among Idris’ enemies for approaching two decades. Vivenna had corresponded with him on several occasions, writing letters at her father’s order to gain practice. The king had wanted her to be familiar with the Idris intelligence branches in T’Telir, should she need them during her life in the city.

 Now, her father’s foresight had worked against him--and for Vivenna. Lemks knew her, and was accustomed to taking orders from her. The king himself had told Lemks to obey Vivenna’s commands as if they had come from him. The spy wouldn’t question--indeed, he hadn’t questioned, when Vivenna had sent him a letter to request a meeting. Her messenger had left Idris just before she herself, but had been able to travel much faster. Lemks’s reply to her had come when she was still a few days out of T’Telir.

 A meeting arranged. In a restaurant at the market. Vivenna had been the one to suggest market day--on such a day, it was even less likely that a foreigner would be noticed or harassed.

 It sounded logical. Her plan seemed good. She was prepared. Why, then, did she feel so utterly daunted when she entered the market?

 She stood quietly, a rock in the flow of human traffic onto the vast field. She had been to markets in Idris before--every four years, her father sponsored a large fair. Plus, she’d been tutored about T’Telir and its market.

 None of that had adequately prepared her for the sight of such an enormous swath of land, covered in tents, pens, buildings, and people. There didn’t appear to be much reason or direction to the organization. Most of the buildings were a single story, but there were so many tents, and they’d been thrown up in a haphazard method. There were no cobblestones here, only sand and dirt with the occasional patch of grass, and the streets appeared to have simply been made where people felt like going.

 Merchants yelled out what they sold, banners waved in the wind, and entertainers vied for attention. It was an orgy of color and motion that shocked Vivenna’s brain.

 “Wow,” Peprin said quietly.

 Vivenna turned, shaking off her stupor. “Didn’t you just come here?”

 “Yeah,” Peprin said, eyes a little glazed over.

 Right, Vivenna thought, sighing. “Let’s go to the restaurant.”

 Peprin nodded. “This way.”

 Vivenna followed him, trying to shake off her awe. This was Hallandren--she shouldn’t be awed by it, she should be disgusted. Yet, she felt almost too overwhelmed to be disgusted. It was hard to feel anything, really, beyond a slight sense of sickness. She’d never realized how much she took for granted Idris’ beautiful simplicity.

 Peprin did a surprisingly good job of leading her through the throng--though she did have to nudge him occasionally to keep him from wandering over to look at some keeper’s wares. Still, she was glad to have him--his height made him easy to keep track of, and his familiar presence was welcome as the overload of scents, sounds, and sights tried to drown her.

 In some places the crowds grew so thick that they practically had to shove their way through. Peprin did so with gusto, but Vivenna had a more difficult time. On occasion, she found herself on the edge of panic, pressed in by dirty, repulsively colored bodies. She cringed when they touched her, and stood hesitantly for a few seconds each time she was forced to touch one of them to shove her way through.

 Blessedly, the restaurant wasn’t too far in. It had a picture of a boat sailing merrily on its shop board, and if the scents coming from inside were any indication, then the ship represented the restaurant’s cuisine. Fish.

 Oh Austre, God of Colors. . . . she thought, nearly gagging. She’d eaten fish several times in preparation for her life in Hallandren. She’d never grown to like it.

 Peprin simply wandered in, speaking good-naturedly with the restaurant owner, heading for one of the tables on the far side. Vivenna followed him, breathing deeply, glad to be out of the throng. She sat down at the table, a little uncertain what one did at a restaurant. In Idris, they didn’t have such things. The inn in Bevalis served meals to travelers, but they were at the innkeeper’s own table, with his family.

 Hallandren restaurants were different. She’d been tutored about them, of course. It said something meaningful to her that places like restaurants could exist in Hallandren--places meant to feed not travelers, but the local population who couldn’t be bothered to dine at their own homes.

 “Vivenna,” Peprin said softly, leaning across the table. “Your hair.”

 She started, realizing that her hair had lightened slightly from the trauma of pushing her way through the crowd. It hadn’t bleached completely white, of course--she was far too well trained for that. However, it had grown a bit whiter, like it had been powdered.

 Feeling a jolt of paranoia, Vivenna replaced the shawl on her head, looking away as the restaurant owner approached to take their order. A short list of meals was scratched into the table, and Peprin immediately began to ask about them, drawing the restaurant owner’s attention.

 You’re better than this, she told herself sternly. You’ve been trained to remain in control. You’ve studied Hallandren for most of your life. You can deal with this.

 Her hair slowly darkened again, returning to its customary black. The change was subtle enough that if someone had been watching, they would have probably just thought it to be a trick of the light. Regardless, she kept the shawl up, feeling ashamed. She looked down at the table with its rough-carved words. One walk through the market, and she lost control? What was wrong with her?

 Think of Siri, she told herself. If it is difficult for you, think how much more trouble she must be in.

 That thought gave her strength. Her mission was impromptu, even insane, but it was important. Calm once again, she put the shawl back down and waited while Peprin chose a dish--a seafood stew of some sort--and the innkeeper walked away.

 “So. . .now what?” Peprin finally asked.

 “We wait,” Vivenna said. “Lemks said he’d check the restaurant each day at noon. It is approaching noon. We will sit here until he arrives.”

 Peprin nodded, fidgeting slightly.

 “What is it?” Vivenna asked calmly.

 He glanced toward the door. “I kind of want to go look at the market some more. The man said our food won’t be ready for a few minutes.”

 Vivenna felt a stab of fear. However, it wasn’t proper to demand Peprin stay and attend her. “Do you promise to stay close?”

 Peprin shrugged. “I guess.”

 “Then go. Take that ridiculous hat you bought me and see if the merchant will give you some of the money back in exchange for it.”

 “All right.”

 “And Peprin?” she said.

 “Yes?”

 “Try not to let him sell you another hat instead. All right?”

 He smiled, winking. “I’ll try.” Then, he eagerly left the room.

 That boy has entirely too much trouble sitting in one place, she thought with annoyance. But, then, that was part of what had made him such a fine woodsman and scout. Either way, he really was a good man. More of a sibling to her than her own brother and sisters, maybe because he was too. . .well, dense to be intimidated by her.

 She sat, arms folded on the table, thinking. Back in Idris, her plan to save Siri had seemed simple. Now, however, the full nature of it lay before her. Somehow, she had to get into the Court of Gods and sneak her sister out. Then she had to provide convincing evidence that the girl had fallen sick or otherwise died of reasons that wouldn’t cause war.

 In concept, it sounded good. But, how to accomplish it? Surely the Court of Gods was well guarded--after all, it held the kingdom’s ruling body. How would she get Siri out in a way that wouldn’t be suspicious? It wouldn’t do much good to save Siri, yet cause an uproar in Hallandren that ended with an army of Lifeless marching on her homeland.

 I can do this, she told herself again. I’m prepared. I’m--

 A man sat down at her table. Less colorfully dressed than most Hallandrens, he wore an outfit made mostly of brown leather, though he did have a token red vest thrown over the top.

 This was not Lemks. The spy was an older man, in his fifties. The one sitting with her had a long face and styled hair, and couldn’t have been older than thirty-five.

 “I hate being a mercenary,” the man said conversationally. “You know why?”

 Vivenna sat, shocked, mouth opened slightly.

 “The prejudice,” the man said. “Everyone else, they do a job, ask for recompense, and generally earn respect. Not mercenaries. We get a bad name just for doing our job. Do you think minstrels ever get spat on for accepting payment from the highest bidder? Do you think bakers ever have to feel guilty for selling pastries to one man, then selling those same pastries to the man’s bitter enemies?”

 He eyed her. “No. Only the mercenary. Unfair, wouldn’t you say?”

 “W. . .who are you?” Vivenna finally managed to ask. She jumped as another man sat down on her other side. Large of girth, this man wore a sword on his back. A colorful bird was sitting on the pommel.

 “I’m Denth,” the first man said, taking her hand and shaking it. “That’s Tonk Fah.”

 “Pleased,” Tonk Fah said, taking her hand once Denth was through with it.

 “Unfortunately, princess,” Denth said, “we’re here to kill you.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Twelve

 Despite her best efforts, Vivenna’s hair bleached a cool, stark white.

 Think! she told herself. You’ve been trained in politics! What do you do in a hostage situation like this? You studied hostage negotiation.

 But what do you do when you are the hostage?

 Suddenly, the two men burst out laughing. The large man with the sword thumped the table several times with his hand, causing his bird to squawk.

 “Sorry, princess,” Denth--the other man--said, shaking his head. “Just a bit of mercenary humor.”

 “We don’t kill,” Tonk Fah said. “That’s assassin work.”

 “Assassins,” Denth said, holding up a finger. “Now, they get respect. Why do you suppose that is? They’re really just mercenaries with fancier names. Institutional bias is the only explanation I can come up with.”

 Vivenna blinked, struggling to keep control of her nerves. “You’re not here to kill me,” she said, voice stiff. “So, you’re just going to kidnap me?”

 “Gods, no,” Denth said. “Bad business, that. How do you make money at it? Kidnap important people, then demand ransoms? If you do that, you’re getting yourself into trouble with people who are bound to be a whole lot more powerful than you are.”

 “Don’t make powerful people angry,” Tonk Fah said, yawning. “Unless you’re getting paid by people who are even more powerful.”

 Denth nodded. “And that isn’t even considering the feeding and care of captives, the exchanging of ransom notes, and the arranging of drop-offs. It’s a headache, I tell you. Hardly worth the trouble.”

 The table fell silent. Vivenna placed her hands flat on its top to keep them from quivering. They know who I am, she thought, forcing herself to think logically. Either they recognize me, or. . . .

 “You work for Lemks,” she said.

 Denth smiled widely. “See Tonk? He said she was a clever one.”

 “Guess that’s why she’s a princess and we’re just mercenaries,” Tonk Fah said.

 Vivenna frowned. Are they mocking me or not? “Where is Lemks? Why didn’t he come himself?”

 Denth smiled again, nodding toward the restaurant owner as the man brought a large pot of steaming stew to the table. It smelt of hot spices, and had what appeared to be crab claws floating in it. The owner dropped a group of wooden spoons to the table, then retreated.

 Denth and Tonk Fah didn’t wait for permission to eat her meal--they just picked up spoons and began to work. “Your friend,” Denth said, sipping at his stew, “Lemks--also known as our employer--isn’t doing so well.”

 “Fevers,” Tonk Fah said between slurps.

 “He requested that we bring you to him,” Denth said. He handed her a folded piece of paper with one hand, cracking a claw between three fingers of the other. Vivenna cringed slightly as he slurped the insides out.

 She glanced down, reading the paper.

 Princess, the words read. Please, trust these men. Denth has served me well for some measure now, and he is loyal--if any mercenary can be called loyal. He and his men have been paid, and I am confident he will stay true to us for the duration of his contract. I offer proof of authenticity by virtue of this password: Bluemask.

 The writing was in Lemks’ hand. More than that, he had given the proper password. Not ‘bluemask’--that was misdirection. The true password was using the word ‘measure’ instead of time. It was as sure an authentication as she was likely to get. She glanced at Denth, who slurped out the insides of another claw.

 “Ah, now,” he said, tossing aside the shell. “This is the tricky part; she has to make a decision. Are we telling her the truth, or are we fooling her? Have we fabricated that letter? Or, maybe we took the old spy captive and tortured him, forcing him to write the words.”

 “We could bring you his fingers as proof of our good faith,” Tonk Fah said. “Would that help?

 Vivenna raised an eyebrow. “Mercenary humor?”

 “Such that it is,” Denth said with a sigh. “We’re not generally a very clever lot. Otherwise, we’d probably have selected a profession without such a high mortality rate.”

 “Like princess,” Tonks said. “Good life-span, those. I’ve often wondered if I should apprentice myself to one.”

 Vivenna frowned as the two men chuckled at their humor. Lemks wouldn’t have broken under torture, she thought. He’s too well trained. And, even if he had broken, he wouldn’t have included both the real password and the false one.

 “Hey!” Peprin’s voice suddenly said, walking in the door. “You started eating without me!” The young man approached the table, placing hands on hips. Only then, apparently, did his brain register that Vivenna was sitting between two unfamiliar soldiers.

 “Um. . . ,” Peprin said. “Who are they?”

 “Servants of Lemks,” Vivenna said, standing. “We’re going with them.”

 “And skip our meal?” Peprin asked.

 Vivenna eyed the red-colored soup and its bobbing crustacean limbs. “Definitely.”

#

 Siri stood in the dark black bedroom, wearing her shift, looking out the window. The God King’s palace was the only structure in the Court of Gods higher than the wall, and the bedroom faced east. Out over the sea.

 She watched the distant waves, feeling the heat of the afternoon air--which was probably worse because of the palace’s black stone. Still, it didn’t bother her. Wearing the shift, the heat was actually pleasant--particularly with the cool breeze blowing in off the ocean. It teased her long hair, ruffling the fabric of her shift.

 No punishment had come for her defiance the night before. She had addressed the God King, had sat up and made a demand of him. She’d waited all morning for some kind of punishment--guards to come arrest her, priests to come lecture her, or servants to come chastise her.

 There had been nothing.

 She leaned down against the windowsill, arms crossed on the cool stone, closing her eyes and feeling the sea breeze blow across her. A part of her was still aghast at the way she had acted. That part was growing smaller and smaller as the time passed.

 I’ve been going about things wrong, here, she thought. I’ve been pushed about by my own fears and worries.

 That wasn’t her. She didn’t usually take time to bother with fears and worries. She just did what seemed right. For some reason, despite the insanity of it, she was beginning to feel that she should have stood up to the God King days ago.

 Perhaps she wasn’t being cautious enough. Perhaps punishment would still come. However, for the moment, she felt as if she’d accomplished something.

 She didn’t yet understand what it was. However, she intended to push it as far as it would go. She smiled, opening her eyes, and let her hair change to a determined golden yellow.

 It was time to stop being afraid of him.

#

 Lemks coughed quietly. His face was streaked with sweat, his skin clammy and pale. He stared up into the air, delirious, though he was obviously too weak to do much more than give the occasional whispered mumble of insanity.

 Vivenna sat on a stool beside his bed, hands in her lap. The two mercenaries stood with Peprin at the back of the room. The only other person present was a solemn nurse--the same woman who had informed Vivenna in a quiet voice that nothing more could be done.

 Lemks was dying. It was unlikely that he would last the day.

 Vivenna studied the bed-ridden man. This was the first time she’d seen his face, though she’d corresponded with him many times over the years. It felt. . .wrong. She knew that Lemks was growing old; that made him a better spy, for fewer people looked for spies in the elderly. Yet, he wasn’t supposed to be this frail stick of a person, shaking and coughing. He was supposed to be a spry, quick-tongued old gentleman. That was how he’d been described, and that was what the letters had implied. That was what she had imagined.

 She’d never know if she’d been right.

 She felt like she was losing one of her dearest friends, though she had never really known him. It wasn’t just her friend who was dying. With him went her refuge in Hallandren, her secret advantage. He was the one who was supposed to have made this insane plan of hers work. The skilled, crafty mentor that she had counted on having at her side.

 He coughed again. The nurse glanced at Vivenna, eyes downcast. “He goes in an out of lucidity, my lady. Just this morning, he spoke of you, but now he’s getting worse and worse. I’ve done what I can, but. . . .”

 “Thank you,” Vivenna said quietly. “You are excused.”

 The woman bowed and left.

 Now, it is time to be princess, Vivenna thought firmly, rising and leaning over Lemks’ bed.

 “Lemks,” she said. “I need your help. Please, you need to pass on the knowledge you know. How do I contact your spy networks? Where are the other Idris agents in the city? What are the passcodes to get them to listen to me?”

 He coughed, staring up unseeingly, whispering something. She leaned closer.

 “. . .never say it,” he said. “You can torture me all that you want. I won’t give in.”

 Vivenna sat back, frowning. By design, the Idris spy network in Hallandren had loose organization. Her father knew all of their agents, of course, but Vivenna had only ever interacted with Lemks. He would have means of getting in touch with some of the other agents in the city.

 And that was what she needed. She gritted her teeth, leaning forward again. She felt like a grave robber as she shook Lemks’ head slightly. “Lemks, look at me. I’m not here to torture you. I’m the princess. You wrote me a letter earlier today. Now I’m here, at your own command.”

 “Can’t fool me,” the old man whispered, eyes still unfocused. “Your torture is nothing to me. I won’t give it up. Not to you.”

 Vivenna frowned, considering her different options.

 Suddenly, Lemks shuddered, and a wave of color washed across the bed, over Vivenna, and pulsed out along the floor. Despite herself, Vivenna stepped back in shock.

 Another pulse came, and she was able to watch it more closely. It wasn’t color itself. It was simply a wave of enhanced color--a ripple that made the hues in the room stand out more as it passed. The floor, the sheets, her own dress--all suddenly flared to vibrant brightness for a second, then faded back to their original colors.

 “What in Austre’s name was that?” Vivenna asked.

 “BioChromatic Breath, princess,” Denth said, leaning against the door behind her. “Old Lemks has a lot of it. Couple hundred Breaths, likely.”

 “That’s impossible,” Vivenna said. “He’s Idrian. He’d never accept Breath from someone else.”

 Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, who stood scratching his parrot’s neck. The bulky soldier just shrugged.

 Another wave of color came from Lemks.

 “He’s dying, princess,” Denth said. “His Breath is going irregular, coming in pulses.”

 “He doesn’t have--”

 Something grabbed her arm. She jumped, looking down at Lemks, who had managed to reach up and take hold of her. He was focused on her face.

 “Princess Vivenna,” he said, eyes showing a bit more lucidity than before.

 “Lemks,” she said, quickly leaning down again. “Your contacts. You have to give them to me.”

 “I’ve done something bad, princess,” the old man said.

 She paused.

 “Breath, princess,” he said. “I’ve taken it. I inherited it from my predecessor, and I’ve bought more. Things. . .things in Hallandren aren’t as expensive as I made them out to be. I didn’t need as much in bribes as your father believed. That money, it bought more BioChroma. Some hundred beyond what I’d already inherited.”

 God of Colors. . . . Vivenna thought with a sick feeling in her stomach.

 “I know it was wrong,” Lemks whispered. “But. . .I felt so powerful. I could make the very dust of the earth obey my command. It was for the good of Idris! Men with Breath are respected here in Hallandren. I could get into parties that I would normally have been forbidden. I could go to the Court of Gods when I wished. The Breath extended my life, made me spry despite my age. I. . . .”

 He blinked, eyes unfocusing.

 “Oh, Austre,” he whispered. “That’s it. I’ve damned myself. I’ve gained notoriety through abusing the souls of others. And now I’m dying. . . .”

 “Lemks!” Vivenna said urgently. “Don’t think about that now. Names! I need names and passcodes to gain access to your network here in T’Telir. Don’t leave me alone!”

 “Damned,” he whispered. “Take it. Take it away from me!”

 Vivenna tried to pull back, but he still had a hold on her arm. She shivered, thinking about the Breath in that body--the body that now touched her.

 “You know, princess,” Denth said from behind. “Nobody really tells mercenaries anything. It’s an unfortunate--but very realistic--drawback of our profession. Never trusted. Never looked to for advice.”

 She glanced back at him, frowning. He leaned against the door, Tonk Fah a short distance away. Peprin stood there as well, wringing his ridiculous green hat in his fingers.

 “Now, if someone were to ask my opinion,” Denth continued, “I’d point out how much a pile of Breaths like his is worth. Sell those off, and you’d have enough money to buy your own spy network--or pretty much anything else you wanted.”

 Vivenna looked back at the dying man. He was mumbling to himself.

 “But if he dies,” Denth noted, “that Breath dies with him. All of it.”

 “A shame,” Tonk Fah said.

 “Truly,” Denth said.

 Vivenna paled. “I will not traffic in the souls of men! I don’t care how much they’re worth.”

 “Suit yourself,” Denth said. “Hope nobody dies because your mission fails, though.”

 Siri. . . .

 “No,” Vivenna said firmly, partially to herself. “I couldn’t take them.”

 It was true. Even the thought of feeling someone else’s Breath mingle with her own--the idea of drawing another person’s soul into her own body--made her sick.

 Vivenna turned back to the dying spy. His BioChroma was burning bright now, and his sheets practically glowed, a faded blue pattern on the white fabric now vibrantly visible. It was better to let that Breath die with him. She still couldn’t believe that he even held it.

 Yet, the prospect of losing Lemks left her feeling cold. Without him, she would have no help in the city. No one to give her advice or guide her. And, she’d barely brought enough money to see to lodging and meals. Bribes, supplies, other costs. . .all of this would be impossible without him.

 If that Breath were really worth as much as Denth implied. . . .

 No! she thought again. No, it just isn’t right!

 But, wouldn’t it make sense to at least store the Breath somewhere? Rescue it from the dying man, in case she did end up needing it? Besides. . .the damage had already been done. The people had given up their Breath; there was nothing Vivenna could do about that. If she let that Breath die, their sacrifices would be wasted.

 It was like the goods one found in a bandit’s cavern. What did you do with the property? Did you throw it away just because it had originally been earned through crime? Her training and lessons whispered to her that she needed resources. If Lemks died, she’d lose the opportunity forever.

 And, maybe I could find the people he bought these Breaths from. Give them back somehow. . . .

 But there was no way she was going to hold stolen Breath within her own body. She turned back, glancing at Denth and Tonk Fah.

 “Don’t look at me like that, princess,” Denth said, chuckling. “I see the glint in your eyes. I’m not going to keep that Breath for you. Having that much BioChroma makes a man far too important.”

 Tonk Fah nodded. “Carrying that much Breath is like hiking about the city with a bag of gold on your back.”

 “I like my own Breath the way it is,” Denth said. “I only need one, and it’s functioning just fine. Keeps me alive, doesn’t draw attention to me, and sits there waiting to be sold if I need it.”

 Vivenna glanced at Peprin. But. . .no, she couldn’t force the Breath on him. She turned back to Denth. “What kind of things does your agreement with Lemks provide for?”

 Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, then glanced back at her, frowning. The look in his eyes was enough. He was paid to obey. He’d take the Breath if she ordered, no matter what his opinion on the matter.

 “Come here,” she said, nodding to a stool beside her.

 Denth approached reluctantly. “You know, princess,” he said, sitting. “If you give me that Breath, then I could just run off with it. I’d be a wealthy man. You wouldn’t want to put that kind of temptation into the hands of an unscrupulous mercenary now, would you?”

 She paused.

 If he runs off with it, then what do I loose? I don’t even want it. I just can’t let the opportunity pass. In a way, Denth would solve a lot of problems for her if he stole the Breath. “Take it,” she ordered.

 Denth sighed. “I can’t take it, princess. That’s not the way it works. Our friend there has to give it to me.”

 She looked at the old man. “I. . . .”

 He has to give it to me.

 She began to command Lemks to do just that, but she had second thoughts. Austre wouldn’t want her to take the Breath, no matter what the circumstances. Taking Breath was dealing in the souls of men--a man who took Breath from others was no better than a slaver. Worse, actually.

 “No,” she said. “No, I’ve changed my mind.”

 At that moment, Lemks stopped his mumbling. He looked up, meeting Vivenna’s eyes.

 His hand was still on her arm.

 “My life to yours,” he said in an eerily clear voice, grip tight on her arm as she jumped back. “My Breath become yours!”

 A vibrant cloud of shifting, oil-on-water air burst from his mouth, puffing toward her. And, as it did, his life faded. Colors darkened around him, sheets loosing their sheen, their pattern growing so faded that it was nearly invisible.

 Vivenna closed her mouth, eyes wide. She ripped her arm free from Lemks’ grip, his face growing dull, his eyes losing of their luster. He grew still, slumping slightly, eyes open.

 Dead.

 The puff of Breath hung in the air, churning, vibrant colors mixing and spreading around her. She kept her mouth closed, head bowed, eyes squeeze shut. She didn’t breath, hoping to somehow keep the Breath out.

 But, apparently, that wasn’t how it worked. The Breath had been Commanded, and it found its new host, even though she didn’t want it. It struck her like a physical force, washing across her body.

 She gasped, falling to her knees. Her body quivered with a sudden, perverse pleasure as a new awareness opened to her. She could feel the other people in the room. She could sense them watching her. And suddenly, everything around her appeared more vibrant, more real, and more alive--even the things that were dead.

 She gasped, shaking slightly at the awe of it all. She vaguely heard Peprin rushing to her side, speaking her name. But, oddly, the only thing she could think of was the melodic quality of his voice. She could pick out each tone in every word he spoke. She knew them instinctively. Could name them all.

 Austre, God of Colors! she thought, steadying herself with one hand against the wooden floor as the shakes subsided. What have I done?

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirteen

 Siri sat nervously, hair blonde with excitement, trying to contain herself as the serving women did her hair. Her week of seclusion was over. Today, finally, she was going to be able to leave the palace. Her Marriage Jubilation--something she found rather inappropriately named--was finally over. It was time for her formal presentation before the Gods of the Hallandren people.

 She was probably too excited. It hadn’t really been that long, and she hadn’t lacked for entertainment. Yet, the prospect of leaving--if only to attend court--made her almost giddy. She would finally get to interact with someone other than priests, scribes, and servants. And, she’d finally get to meet some of the Gods that she’d always heard about.

 And then there was him. So far, the only times she’d been able to see the God King had been during their nightly encounters. Even when she now hesitantly looked up at him, he was shrouded in shadow. Today, she would see him in the light.

 She smiled, inspecting herself in a large mirror. They’d done her hair in an amazingly intricate style, with part of it braided, the rest still allowed to flow free. She also had several red ribbons tied into the braids and woven into the free-flowing hair.

 The ribbons glistened and shimmered as she turned her head, inspecting herself in the mirror. Her family would have been mortified at the ostentatious colors. Siri, however, smiled mischievously, consciously making her hair turn a brighter shade of golden blonde, highlighting the ribbons even further.

 The serving women smiled approvingly, a couple letting out quiet ‘ooo’s at the transformation. Siri sat back, hands in lap as others brought forward clothing choices for the court appearance. The garments were ornate--not as complex as the ones she wore to the bedchambers, of course, but still far more formal than her everyday choices.

 Red seemed to be the theme of choice for the serving women and priests today. However, that made Siri want to choose something else. Eventually, she decided on gold, a and she pointed at the two golden gowns, having the women bring them forward so she could look at them more closely. Unfortunately, as she did so, the women fetched three more golden dresses from a rolling wardrobe out in the hallway.

 Siri sighed. It was as if they were determined to keep her from having a reasonably simple choice of the matter. She just hated seeing so many options disappear each day. If only. . . .

 She paused. “Could I try them all on?”

 The serving women glanced at each other, a little confused. They nodded toward her, their expressions conveying a simple message. Of course you can. Siri felt foolish, but in Idris, she’d never had the chance to go shopping for different dresses. She had worn what she was given.

 But she was a queen now. She smiled, standing and letting take off her robe in a way that didn’t mess up her hair. After that, they dressed her in the first of the gowns. Siri inspected herself, noting that the neckline was still rather low. She was willing to splurge on color, but the amount of flesh Hallandrens showed--even the servants--still felt scandalous to her.

 She nodded, letting them take off the gown. Then, they dressed her in the next one--a two-piece garment with skirt and separate corset. Once they were finished, Siri eyed this new outfit in the mirror. She liked it, but she wanted to try the others as well. So, after spinning about a bit and inspecting the back, she nodded and moved on.

 It was frivolous, of course. But, why was she so worried about being frivolous? Her father wasn’t around to regard her with that stern, disapproving face of his. Vivenna was an entire kingdom away. None of the people in the room would be corrupted by her bad example.

 Quite the opposite. Siri was queen of the Hallandren people. Shouldn’t she try to learn their ways? Act like them, a little bit--if only out of solidarity, of course. She smiled at the ridiculous justification, but went on to the next gown anyway.

#

 “We’ll give it away,” Vivenna said firmly.

 The mercenaries glanced at her. They sat in Lemks’s home, though they had moved from the bed chamber--where his corpse still lay--down to the sitting room. Like most in Hallandren, the location was swollen with exaggerated colors. In Lemks’ home, that mostly came in the way of walls made from thin strips of reed-like wood, stained with bright yellows and greens.

 Vivenna couldn’t help but notice that she saw each color more vibrantly now. She had a strange sense for color--she could divide its shades and hues, understanding instinctively how close each color was to ideal, pure tones. It was like perfect pitch--which she’d also apparently gained--except for the eyes.

 It was very, very difficult not to see beauty in the colors around her now.

 Denth leaned against the far wall. Tonk Fah lounged on a couch, yawning periodically, his colorful bird perched on his foot. Peprin had gone to report to Vivenna’s other men, who were still camped outside the city.

 “Give it away, Princess?” Denth asked.

 “The Breath,” Vivenna said calmly. She sat on a stool--she’d managed to find one in the kitchens--instead of one of the overly-plush chairs or couches. “We will go out and find unfortunate people who have been raped by your culture, their Breath stolen, and I will give them Lemks’ Breath. One at a time, until it is all gone.”

 Denth shot a glace at Tonk Fah, who simply yawned.

 “Princess,” Denth said, “you can’t give Breath away one at a time. You have to give it all away at once.”

 “Including your own Breath,” Tonk Fah said.

 Denth nodded. “You could give away what Lemks gave you, but you’d have to give it all to one person--and that would leave you as a Drab.”

 Vivenna’s stomach churned at that. The thought of not only losing the new beauty and color she saw, but her own Breath--her soul, essentially--too. . . . Well, it was almost enough to turn her hair white.

 “No,” she said. “We’re not going to do that.”

 The room fell silent.

 “She could Awaken stuff,” Tonk Fah noted, wiggling his foot, making his bird squawk. “Stick the Breath inside of a pair of pants or something. That could take some of her Breath but not all of it.”

 “That’s a good point,” Denth said.

 “What. . .does that entail?” Vivenna asked.

 “You bring something to life, princess,” Denth said. “An inanimate object. That’ll draw out some of your Breath, and leave the object kind of alive. Most Awakeners do it temporarily, but I don’t see why you couldn’t just leave the Breath there.”

 Awakening inanimate objects. Taking the souls of men and using them to create unliving monstrosities. Somehow, Vivenna felt that Austre would find that an even greater sin than simply bearing the Breath. She sighed, shaking her head. The Breath was, in a way, just a distraction. It was an immediate problem, feared she was using it to keep herself from dwelling on the uncomfortable truth that was represented by the corpse upstairs.

 She could no longer count on Lemks to guide her. What, then, was she going to do?

 Denth sat down in a chair beside her, resting his feet up on the sitting table. He kept himself better groomed than Tonk Fah, his dark hair pulled back into a neat tail, his face clean-shaven. “I hate being a mercenary,” he said. “You know why?”

 She raised an eyebrow.

 “No job security,” Denth said, leaning back in his chair. “The kinds of things we do, they tend to be dangerous, and a little unpredictable. Our employers have a habit of dying off on us.”

 “Though usually not from the chills,” Tonk Fah noted. “Swords tend to be the method of choice.”

 “Take our current predicament,” Denth said. “No more employer. That leaves us without any real direction.”

 Vivenna paused. No direction. Does that mean their contract is over?

 They know I’m a princess of Idris. What will they do with that information?

 Denth eyed her. “You see it?” he asked, turning to Tonk Fah.

 “Yeah,” Tonk Fah said. “She’s thinking it.”

 Denth leaned back further in his chair. “See, now this is exactly what I’m talking about. Why is it that everyone assumes that when a mercenary’s contract is over, he’ll immediately betray them? Do other people have to deal with that? I mean, do you think a surgeon has that problem? Do people worry that the moment they’re done paying him, he’ll laugh maniacally and cut off their toes?”

 “I like cutting off toes,” Tonk Fah noted.

 “That’s different,” Denth said. “It makes sense for you. Either way, you wouldn’t do it simply because your contract ran out, would you?”

 “Nah,” Tonk Fah said. “Toes is toes.”
 Vivenna rolled her eyes. “Is there a point to this?”

 “The point is, princess,” Denth said, pointing at her. “You were thinking that we were going to betray you. Maybe rob you blind or sell you to slavery or something.”

 “Nonsense,” Vivenna said. “I was thinking nothing of the sort.”

 “I’m sure,” Denth replied. “Why does everyone assume that we’ll stab them in the belly the moment we get an opportunity? Why does everyone assume that we’re criminals? Mercenary work is very respectable--it’s legal in a good half dozen kingdoms. We’re just as much a part of the community as the baker or the fishmonger.”

 “Not that we pay the tax collectors,” Tonk Fah added. “We tend to stab them in the belly the moment we get an opportunity.”

 Vivenna just shook her head.

 Denth, however, leaned forward, speaking in a more serious tone. “What I’m trying to say, princess, is that we’re not criminals. We’re employees. And your friend Lemks was our boss. Now he’s dead. I pretty much figure that our contract transfers to you now, if you want it.”

 Vivenna paused, feeling a slight glimmer of hope. They aren’t Lemks, she thought, but they do obviously know a lot about the city.

 But, could she trust them? Despite Denth’s speech, she found it a little hard to trust in the motives and altruism of a of couple men who killed for money.

 Yet, they had come and gotten her, instead of taking advantage of Lemks’s sickness. Denth was right on one point--there was no reason to assume that simply because they were mercenaries, they were also thieves.

 “All right,” she said slowly. “How much is left on your contract?”

 “No idea,” Denth said. “Jewels handles that kind of thing.”

 “Jewels?” Vivenna asked.

 “Third member of the group,” Tonk Fah said. “She’s off doing Jewels stuff.”

 Vivenna frowned. “How many of you are there?”

 “Just three,” Denth said.

 “Unless you count pets,” Tonk Fah said, balancing his bird on his foot.

 “She’ll be back in a bit,” Denth said. “However, I know we’ve got at least a few months left on our contract, and we were paid half up front. Even if you decide not to pay the rest, we probably owe you a few more weeks.”

 Tonk Fah nodded. “So, if there’s anyone you want killed, now would be the time.”

 Vivenna paused, and Tonk Fah chuckled.

 “You’re really going to have to get used to our terrible senses of humor, princess,” Denth said. “We’re men of rather base wit. Assuming, of course, you’re going to keep us around.”

 “I’ve already said that I’ll keep you,” Vivenna said.

 “All right,” Denth replied. “But what are you going to do with us? Why did you even come to the city?”

 Siri paused. No point in holding back, she thought. They know the most dangerous secret--my identity--already.

 “I’m here to rescue my sister,” she said. “To sneak her out of the God King’s palace and see her returned to Idris unharmed.”

 The two fell quiet. Finally, Tonk Fah whistled. “Ambitious,” he noted as his parrot mimicked the whistle.

 “She is a princess,” Denth said. “They tend to be ambitious sorts, I hear.”

 “Siri isn’t ready to deal with Hallandren,” Vivenna said, leaning forward. “I don’t know why my father decided to send her in my place, but I cannot stand the thought of her serving as the God King’s wife. Unfortunately, if we simply grab her and go, Hallandren will likely attack my homeland. So, we need to make her disappear in a way that isn’t damning to my people. Then, if we have to, we can substitute me in Siri’s place.”

 Denth scratched his head.

 “Well?” Vivenna asked.

 “Little bit out of our realm of expertise,” Denth said, leaning back in his chair again.

 “We usually hit things,” Tonk Fah said.

 Denth nodded. “Or, at least, keep things from getting hit. Lemks kept us on as bodyguards.”

 Vivenna hadn’t ever stopped to consider why Lemks would want a pair of mercenary warriors. “Why wouldn’t he just send for a couple of Idris soldiers to protect him? My father would have sent them.”

 Denth and Tonk Fah exchanged a look.

 “How can I put this delicately?” Denth said. “Princess, your Lemks was embezzling money from the king and spending it on Breath.”

 “Lemks was a patriot!” Vivenna said immediately.

 “That may have been the case,” Denth said. “But even a good priest isn’t occasionally above slipping himself a few coins out of the coffer, so to speak. I think your Lemks figured it would be better to have outside muscle, rather than inside loyalists, protecting him.”

 Vivenna fell silent. It was still hard to imagine the thoughtful, clever, and passionate man represented in Lemk’s letters as a thief. Yet, Lemks had confessed to his sins, and the Breath was undeniable proof. She simply had to look at anything colorful to be reminded of that.

 “You know, you learn things as a mercenary,” Denth said, resting back with hands behind his head. “You fight enough people, and you figure you start to understand them a bit. It’s a strange thing. You stay alive by anticipating others. The thing is, people aren’t simple, princess. Even Idrians.”

 “Boring, yes,” Tonk Fah added. “But not simple.”

 “Your Lemks, he was involved in some big things,” Denth said. “I honestly think he was the patriot you imagine him to be. There are plans and intrigues going on in this city, princess--some of the projects Lemks had us working on looked toward a much bigger picture. Many of those were for the good of Idris, if I interpret things right. I guess he just thought he should be compensated a little for that patriotism.”

 “Quite an amiable fellow, actually,” Tonk Fah said. “Didn’t want to bother your father. So he just did the figures on his own, gave himself a raise, and didn’t bother anyone with the numbers.”

 Vivenna fell silent, letting herself digest the words. How could anyone who stole money from Idris also be a patriot? Could a person faithful to Austre end up with several hundred BioChromatic Breaths?

 She shook her head wryly. I saw men who placed themselves above others, and I saw them cast down, she thought. It was one of the Five Visions, prime tenets of her religion. Who was she to judge Lemks? Particularly now that he was dead.

 “Wait a moment,” she said, eying the mercenaries. “You said that you were just bodyguards. What, then, were you doing helping Lemks with ‘projects’?”

 The two men paused.

 “Told you she was smart,” Tonk Fah said. “Comes from not being a mercenary.”

 “We are bodyguards, princess,” Denth said. “However, we’re not unposessing of certain. . .skills. We can defend you in a fight. We can also make things happen.”

 “Things?” Vivenna asked.

 “Projects, problems, situations,” Denth said. “We know people. That’s part of what makes us useful. Let me think about this issue with your sister. Maybe I’ll be able to come up with some ideas, though I’ve never really done anything quite like this before. It’s a little like kidnapping. . . .”

 “Which,” Tonk Fah said, “we’re not too fond of. Did we mention that?”

 “Yes,” Vivenna said. “Bad business. No money.”

 “Exactly,” Tonk Fah said, resting back and yawning again.

 “What were these ‘projects’ Lemks was working on,” Vivenna asked, turning back to Denth.

 “I’m not exactly sure, Princess,” he admitted. “We only saw pieces--running errands, arranging meetings, intimidating people. It had something to do with work for your father, I presume. We can find out for you, if you want.”

 Vivenna nodded slowly. “I do.”

 Denth stood. “All right,” he said. He walked past Tonk Fah’s couch, smacking the larger man’s leg, causing the bird to squawk. “Tonk. Come on. Time to ransack the house.”

 Tonk Fah yawned and sat up.

 “Wait!” Vivenna said. “Ransack the house?”

 “Sure,” Denth said, heading up the stairs. “Break out any hidden safes. Search through papers and files. Figure out what old Lemks was up to.”

 “He won’t care much,” Tonk Fah said, standing. “If you want, we’ll turn the body face down so he doesn’t have to watch.”

 Vivenna shifted uncomfortably. They’d sent the nurse for an undertaker, but he hadn’t arrived yet. Still, she wasn’t so much worried about Lemks as the propriety of the event. Having a pair of toughs ransack the house? It seemed a bit. . .unseemly.

 Denth must have noticed her discomfort. “We don’t have to, if you don’t want us to.”

 “Sure,” Tonk Fah said. “We’ll never know what Lemks was up to, though.”

 “Continue,” Vivenna said. “But I’m going to supervise.”

 “Actually, I doubt that you will,” Denth said.

 “And why is that?”

 “Because,” Denth said. “Now, I know nobody ever asks mercenaries for their opinion. You see--”

 “Oh, just get on with it,” Vivenna said with annoyance, though she immediately chastised herself for her ostentatious snappishness. The last few days had been a little bit. . .draining.

 Denth just smiled, as if he found her outburst incredibly amusing. “Today’s the day when the Returned hold judicial court, princess,” he said.

 “So?”

 “So,” Denth replied, “it’s also the day when your sister will be presented to the Court of Gods as their new queen. I suspect that you’ll want to go get a good look at her, see how she’s holding up. And, if you’re going to do that, you’ll want to get moving. Court will begin pretty soon here.”

 Vivenna folded her arms, not moving. “I’ve been tutored all about the court, Denth. I know things--like the fact that regular people can’t just walk into the Court of Gods. If you want into the court to watch judgments, you either have to be favored of one of the Gods, be extremely influential, or you have to draw lottery.”

 “True,” Denth said, leaning against the banister. “If only we knew someone with enough ­BioChromatic Breath to instantly be considered influential and important, and therefore easily gain entrance to the court without being questioned.”

 “Ah, Denth,” Tonk Fah said. “Someone has to have at least fifty Breath to be considered worthy of watching judgments! That’s a terribly high number.”

 Vivenna paused. “And. . .how much Breath do I have?”

 “Oh, around five hundred or so,” Denth said. “At least, that’s what Lemks claimed he had. I’m inclined to believe him. You are, after all, making the carpet shine.”

 She glanced down, noticing for the first time that she was creating a subtle pocket of enhanced color around her. It wasn’t very distinct, but it was noticeable. Again, it wasn’t that the colors were glowing or giving off light--they were simply more. . .full.

 To the side, the door beads rustled, and Peprin walked into the room, waving to the mercenaries. He had, she noticed, purchased himself a ridiculous red shirt--covered with golden tassels--during his trip in and out of the city.

 “You’d better get going, princess,” Denth said, continuing to clomp up the stairs. “You’ll be late.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fourteen

 “It’s raining,” Lightsong noted.

 “Very astute, your grace,” Llarimar said, walking beside his God.

 “I’m not fond of rain.”

 “So you have often noted, your grace.”

 “I’m a God,” Lightsong said. “Shouldn’t I have power over the weather? How can it rain if I don’t want it to?”

 “There are currently twenty-five Gods in the Court, your grace. Perhaps more of them desire rain than those who don’t desire it.”

 Lightsong’s robes of gold and red rustled as he walked. The grass was cool and damp beneath his sandaled toes, but a group of servants carried a wide pavilion over him and Llarimar. Rain fell softly to the cloth above. In T’Telir, rainfalls were relatively common, but they were never very strong..

 Lightsong would have liked to have seen a true rainstorm, like people said happened out in the jungles. That, however, was unlikely to ever happen.

 “I’ll take a poll then,” Lightsong said. “Of the other Gods. See how many them wanted it to rain today.”

 “If you wish, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But, it won’t prove much.”
 “It’ll prove who’s fault this is,” Lightsong said. “And. . .if it turns out that most of us want it to stop raining, perhaps that will start a theological crisis.”

 Llarimar, of course, didn’t seem bothered by the concept of a God trying to undermine his own religion. “Your grace,” he said. “Our doctrine is quite sound, I assure you.”

 “And if the Gods don’t want it to rain, yet it still does?”

 “Would you like it to be sunny all the time, your grace?”

 Lightsong shrugged. “Sure.”

 “And the farmers?” Llarimar said. “Their crops would die without the rain.

 “It can rain on the crops,” Lightsong said, “just not in the city. A few selective weather patterns shouldn’t be too much for a God to accomplish.”

 “The people need water to drink, your grace,” Llarimar said. “The streets need to be washed clean. And, what of the plants in the city. The beautiful trees, even this grass that you enjoy walking across, would die if the rain did not fall.”

 “Well,” Lightsong said, “I could just will them to continue living.”

 “And that is what you do, your grace,” Llarimar said. “Your soul knows that rain in the city is best for it, and so it rains. Despite what your consciousness thinks.”

 Lightsong frowned. “By that argument, you could claim that anyone was a God, Llarimar.”

 “Not just anyone comes back from the dead, your grace. Nor do they have the power to heal the sick, and they certainly don’t have your ability to foresee the future.”

 Good points, those, Lightsong thought as they approached the arena. The large, circular structure was at the back of the Court of Gods, outside of the ring of palaces that surrounded the God King’s courtyard. Lightsong’s entourage moved inside--red pavilion still held above him--and entered the sand-covered arena yard. Then, they moved up a ramp toward the seating area.

 The arena had four rows of seats for regular people--stone benches, accommodating T’Telir citizens who were favored, lucky, or rich enough to get themselves into a judgment session. The upper reaches of the arena, however, were reserved for the Returned. Here--close enough to hear what was said on the arena floor, yet far enough back to remain stately--were the boxes. Large, ornate, and stone, they were large enough to hold a god’s entire entourage.

 Lightsong could see that several of his colleagues had arrived, marked by the colorful pavilions which sat above their boxes. Windreader was there, as was Mercystar. Lightsong would have liked to have spent his time with one of them. That, however, was not to be. They passed by the empty box usually reserved for Lightsong, and did not enter. Instead, they made their way around the ring and approached a box topped by a green pavilion.

 Blushweaver lounged inside. Her green and silver dress was lavish--as always--but also very revealing. Despite its rich trim and embroidery, it was little more than a long swath of cloth with a hole in the center for her head. That left it open completely on both sides from shoulder to calf, and Blushweaver’s thighs curved out lusciously on either side. She sat up, smiling at Lightsong as he approached.

 I asked for this, Lightsong thought with a sigh. He still wasn’t certain what made him so hesitant about dealing with Blushweaver. She always treated him kindly, and she certainly did have a high opinion of him. It was just that he felt like he had to be on guard at all times when he was around her. A man could be taken in by a woman such as she.

 Taken in, then never released.

 “Lightsong, dear,” she said, smiling more deeply as Lightsong’s servants scuttled forward, setting up his chair, footrest, and snack table.

 “Blushweaver,” Lightsong replied. “My high priest tells me that you’re to blame for this dreary weather.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, and to the side--standing with the other priests--Llarimar flushed slightly.

 “I like the rain,” Blushweaver finally said, lounging back on her couch. “It’s. . .different. I like things that are different.”

 “Then you should be thoroughly bored by me, my dear,” Lightsong said, seating himself and taking a handful of grapes--already pealed for him--from the bowl on his snack table.

 “Bored?” Blushweaver asked.

 “I am anything but different. I strive for nothing if not mediocrity, and mediocrity is hardly original. If it were, I believe that the universe should find the word far too ironic to exist.”

 “You bow before the whims of the universe, then,” Blushweaver said, leaning back, tips of her fingers wiggling as she stretched.

 “What else would I do?”

 “Fight it,” Blushweaver said, finishing her stretch. She narrowed her eyes, absently reaching to take one of the grapes from Lightsong’s hand as she regarded the floor of the arena. “Fight with everything, force the universe to bow to you instead.”

 “I don’t know if I can do that, Blushweaver.”

 “You’re a God.”

 “A God who can’t even make it stop raining.”

 “I want it to storm and tempest. Maybe this drizzle is the compromise between us.”

 Lightsong popped another grape in his mouth, squishing it between his teeth, feeling the sweet juice leak onto his palate. He thought for a moment, chewing.

 “Blushweaver, dear,” he finally said. “Is there some kind of subtext to our current conversation? Because, as you might know, I am absolutely terrible with subtext. It gives me a headache.”

 “You can’t get headaches,” Blushweaver said with a light flip of the hand.

 “Well, I can’t get subtext either. Far too subtle for me. It takes effort to understand, and effort is--unfortunately--against my religion.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “A new tenet for those who worship you?”

 “Oh, not that religion,” Lightsong said. “I mean the one that I’m going to convert to. I’m thinking of becoming a worshipper of Austre. His seems a rather blunt theology--black, white, no bothering with complications. Faith without any bothersome thinking.”

 Blushweaver stole another grape. “You just don’t know Austrism well enough. It’s complex. If you’re looking for something really simple, you should try the Pahn Kahl religion.”

 Lightsong paused. “Don’t they just worship the Returned, like the rest of us?”

 “No. They have their own religion.”

 “But, everyone knows the Pahn Kahl are practically Hallandrens,” Lightsong said.

 Blushweaver shrugged, watching the stadium floor below.

 “And. . .how exactly did we get onto this tangent, anyway?” Lightsong said. “I swear, my dear. Sometimes our conversations remind me of a broken longsword.”

 She raised an eyebrow.

 “Sharp as hell,” Lightsong said, “but lacking a point.”

 Blushweaver snorted quietly. “You’re the one who asked to meet with me, Lightsong.”

 “Yes, but we both know that you wanted me to. What are you planning, Blushweaver?”

 Blushweaver rolled her grape between her fingers. “Wait,” she said.

 Lightsong sighed, waving for a servant to bring him some nuts. One placed a bowl on the table, then another came forward and began to crack them for him.

 “You want me to wait?” he asked, munching on his first nut. “First you imply that I should join with you, now you won’t tell me what you want me to do? I swear, woman. Someday, your ridiculous sense of drama is going to cause cataclysmic problems--like, for instance, boredom in your companions.”

 “It’s not drama,” she said, huffing slightly. “It’s respect.” She nodded directly across the arena, where the God King’s box still stood empty, golden throne sitting on a pedestal above the box itself.

 “Ah. Feeling patriotic today, are we?”

 “It’s more that I’m curious.”

 “About?”

 “Her.”

 Lightsong paused. “The queen?”

 Blushweaver gave him a flat stare. “Of course, her. Who else would I be speaking about?”

 “Dear, they call me Lightsong the Brave, not Lightsong the Clever. Don’t expect me to figure things out on my own. I presume that the queen’s period of isolation is over, then?”

 Blushweaver nodded.

 “So soon?” Lightsong said.

 “It’s been a week.”

 Lightsong paused, counting off the days. It had been a week. “Huh,” he said to himself.

 “You really should pay more attention to these sorts of things, Lightsong.”

 He shrugged. “Time tends to pass you by more quickly when take no notice of it, my dear. In that, it’s remarkably similar to womankind.” With that, he accepted a handful of nuts, then settled back to wait.

#

 Apparently, the people of T’Telir weren’t fond of carriages--not even to carry Gods. Siri sat, a little bit amused, as a group of serving men carried her chair across the grass toward a large, circular structure at the back of the Court of Gods. It was raining. She didn’t care. She’d been cooped up for far too long.

 She turned, twisting in her chair, looking back over a group of serving women who carried her dress’s long golden train, keeping it off the wet grass. Behind them was another group of women, and these carried a large pavilion over Siri’s head, using several poles to keep it up.

 “Could you. . .move that aside?” Siri asked. “Let the rain fall on me?

 The serving women glanced at each other.

 “Just for a little bit,” Siri said. “I promise.”

 The women shared frowns, but slowed, allowing Siri’s porters to pull ahead and expose her to the rain. She looked up, smiling as the drizzle fell on her face. Seven days is far too long to spend indoors, she decided, blinking the water out of her eyes.

 She waited for a long moment, enjoying the cool wetness on her skin and clothing. The grass looked inviting. Hesitantly, she glanced back again. “I could walk, you know.” Feel my toes in that grass. . . .

 The serving women looked very, very uncomfortable about that concept.

 “Or not. . . .” Siri said, sighing and turning around as the women hurried up, again covering the sky with their pavilion.

 They were probably right--walking was a bad idea. Particularly since she’d eventually chosen a dress with such a long train. Despite her hesitance back in the palace, she’d eventually chosen a dress far more daring than anything she’d ever worn. The neckline was a bit low, and it had no sleeves. It also had a curious shape that covered the front of her legs with only a short skirt, yet had a long dress in the back. She’d picked it half because of the novelty, though she blushed every time she thought of how much leg it showed.

 Still--as she was growing more confident telling herself--she was in Hallandren now. She could do things like they did, and it would be perfectly all right.

 Soon, they arrived at the round building, and her porters carried her up the ramp into it. Siri was interested to see that it had no ceiling, and had a sand-covered floor.

 Just above the floor, a colorful group of people were gathering in a series of benches. Though some of them carried umbrellas, many were heedless of the light rain, chatting amiably amongst themselves. Siri smiled at the collection; a hundred different colors and as many different clothing styles were represented in the people she passed. For an entire week, the only people she’d seen--save Bluefingers--had worn the exact same colors as everyone else. It was good to see some variety again, even if that variety was a little bit garish.

 Her porters carried her up to a large stone cleft built into the side of the building. Here, her women took the pavilion and slid its poles into slots in the stone, letting it stand freely to cover the entire box. Servants soon scuttled about, bringing out chairs and pulling free their protective wrappings so that Siri wouldn’t have to sit on a damp cushion.

 Her porters put her down, and she stepped free from the chair. She turned, frowning. She was finally free of the palace. And yet, it appeared as if she were going to have to sit above and distant from the people. Even the other Gods--which she assumed were in the other pavilioned boxes--were distant from her, separated by walls.

 How is it that they can make me feel alone, even when surrounded by hundreds of people?

 She turned to one of her serving women. “The God King. Where is he?”

 The woman gestured toward the other pavilions set into boxes like Siri’s.

 “He’s in one of them?” Siri asked.

 “No, Vessel,” the woman said very quietly, eyes downcast. “He will not arrive until the Gods are all here.”

 Ah, Siri thought. Makes sense, I guess.

 She sat back in her chair as several servants prepared food, should she want it. To the side, a minstrel sat down and quietly began to play a flute, as if to drown out the sounds of the people talking below. She would rather have heard the talking.

 Still, Siri decided not to let herself get into a bad mood. At least she was outside. She could see other people, even if she couldn’t interact with them. She smiled to herself, leaning forward, elbows on knees as she studied the exotic colors below.

 What was she to make of city people? They were just so remarkably diverse. Some had dark skin--would meant they were probably from the edges of the Hallandren kingdom. Others had yellow hair, or even strange hair colors--blue and green--that came, Siri assumed, from dyes.

 All wore brilliant colored clothing, as if there were no other option. Hats were popular, both on men and women, and they varied in style greatly. Clothing ranged from vests and shorts to deep robes and gowns.

 How much time must they spend shopping for clothing! she thought. It was difficult enough for her to choose what to ear, and she only had about a dozen choices each day--and no hats. After she’d refused the first few, the servants had stopped offering them.

 Slowly, entourage after entourage arrived, each bearing a different set of colors--a hue and a metallic, usually. She counted the pavilions. There were room for some fifty Gods, but the Court only had a couple dozen. Twenty five, was it?

 She squinted, watching the Gods when they entered. In each procession, she saw a figure standing taller than the others. Some--mostly the women--were carried on chairs or couches. The men generally walked, some wearing intricate robes, others nothing wearing more than sandals and skirt.

 They stood out. It wasn’t just their height. There was a. . .radiance to them. Not a glow like the sun or a lantern. The colors around them simply seemed more vibrant, the people more healthy. Siri leaned forward further, studying one God as he walked right by her box. His bare chest made her blush, but it let her see his well-muscled body and toned flesh.

 He glanced at her, then nodded his head slightly in respect. His servants and priests bowed almost to the ground. Then, the man continued on, having said nothing. Siri’s own greeting died on her lips. Somehow, it didn’t feel right.

 She sat back in her chair, shaking her head slightly as one of the servants tried to bring her food. There were still four or five Gods left to arrive. Apparently, the Hallandren deities weren’t as punctual as Bluefingers’ schedule-keeping had led her to believe.

#

 Vivenna stepped through the gates, passing into the Hallandren Court of Gods, and stopped, looking back. Small groups of people passed through on either side of her, though there wasn’t much of a crowd.

 Denth had been right--it had been easy for her to get into the Court. Though the two priests at the gate stopped many of the people trying to get in, they had waved Vivenna through without even asking her identity. She turned back, glancing at the two priests in their blue robes. She could see bubbles of colorfulness around them, indications of their strong BioChroma.

 Vivenna had a similar bubble, but hers was even stronger. She’d been tutored about this, of course. The priests guarding the gates must have had enough Breath to get them to the First Heightening, the level at which a person gained the ability to distinguish Breath in other people. She’d always assumed that, upon gaining the First Heightening, an Awakener would see a glow coming off of people with more Breath.

 It didn’t work that way. Indeed, she doubted things looked all that different to her eyes than they did to a regular person’s eyes. It was just like the perfect pitch she had gained--other people heard the sounds too, she just had the ability to understand them.

 That’s how it worked with determining Breath level too. She saw how close a person had to get to one of the priests before the colors increased, and she exactly how much more colorful things became. This information let her know intrinsically that each of the priests was of the First Heightening. She could tell it as accurately as her perfect pitch let her read an exact tone, or her sense of perfect hue let her tell the exact composition of a color.

 She could do it for everyone. Peprin had one Breath, as did the regular peasants who had to present papers to gain entrance to the Court. She could tell how strong that Breath was, and if they were sick or not.

 The priests each had about a hundred breaths, as did the majority of the more wealthy individuals entering through the gates. A reasonable number had two or three hundred Breaths. Only a couple had more than Vivenna. And that, undoubtedly, was why she was able to walk right through the gates without so much as a glance.

 She turned away. She’d been tutored about the First Heightening, but she’d never expected to experience it first hand. She felt dirty. Profane. Particularly because the colors were just so beautiful.

 She looked up, regarding the Court in its majesty. It contained a wide circle of palaces, just like her tutors had explained. Yet, those tutors had not mentioned how each palace was so perfectly balanced in color and hue. Each was perfect, with very subtle color gradients that normal people just wouldn’t be able to appreciate.

 These sat on a pure, uniformly green lawn. It was trimmed carefully, and it was marred by neither road nor pathway. Vivenna stepped onto it, Peprin at her side, and part of her wished to kick off her shoes and walk in the wet, dew-covered grass. But, then, that wouldn’t be appropriate at all.

 The drizzle was finally starting to let up, and Peprin lowered the parasol he’d bought--against her wishes--to keep them both dry. “So, this is it,” he said, shaking off the parasol. “The Court of Gods.”

 Vivenna nodded.

 “Good place to graze sheep.”

 “I doubt that,” she said quietly.

 Peprin frowned, obviously thinking about that comment. “Goats, then?” he finally said.

 Vivenna waved him forward, and they joined the small procession walking through the grass toward a structure outside of the circle of palaces. She’d been worried about standing out--after all, she still wore her simple Idris dress, with its high neck, functional fabric, and muted colors. Yet, she was beginning to realize that there just wasn’t a way to stand out in T’Telir.

 The people around her wore such a stunning variety of outfits that she wondered who had the imagination to design them all. Some were as covering as Vivenna’s, and others had muted colors--though these were usually accented by bright scarves or hats. Modesty in both design and color was obviously unpopular, but not non-existent.

 It’s all about drawing attention, she realized. Some wear the whites and faded colors as a reaction against the bright colors. But, because everyone tries so hard to look distinctive, nobody does!

 Which meant, probably, that she was safe. Feeling a little more secure, she glanced at Peprin. He was obviously enjoying the experience, perhaps too much.

 “Look at how funny the buildings are, Vivenna,” he said, pointing at the closest palace. “The people here are all wear a lot of colors, but the buildings are each just one color! I wonder why that is.”

 Vivenna glanced at the building. “It’s not one color. It’s many different shades of the same color.”

 Peprin shrugged. “Red is red.”

 Vivenna shook her head. How could she explain? To her eyes, the building was a complex work of art. Each shade was a different. . .level of red. Like a musical scale. There were notes, half-notes, thirds and fifths. Some formed harmonies, some formed dissonances.

 The walls were of pure red. The roof tiles, side columns, and other ornamentations were of slightly different shades, each distinct and intentional. The columns, for instance, formed stepping fifths of color, harmonizing with the base tint of the walls.

 It was like a symphony of hues. Every was exact, with just the right amount of white to make it harmonize. The building had obviously been constructed for a person who had obtained the Third Heightening, for only one such as Vivenna would be able to see the ideal resonance.

 To others. . .well, it was just a bunch of red.

 “I’ll bet that they ran out of paint half-way through,” Peprin said. “Then, they had to mix more, and they didn’t quite get it right. I did that once with my mom’s house. I whitewashed half, then ran out of wash and got some more. But, it was darker, and her house ended up looking like it was painted half one color, and half another!”

 Vivenna just shook her head. There was no way to explain. They passed the palace, approaching the arena. Vivenna had, of course, been tutored about the structure. Central to the lives of the Hallandren gods was entertainment. After all, one couldn’t expect gods to do anything useful with their time.

 However, for particular events, there was the arena. Vivenna frowned, remembering some of the things that were supposed to pass for entertainment in the building. This day, however, she needn’t worry about that--for while the arena was a place of entertainment, it was also the location of Hallandren legislative debates. Today, politics would be the center of attention, as priests of various gods argued for the sport of their deities.

 Vivenna and Peprin waited their turn as the people crowded around the arena entrance. As they did, Vivenna glanced to the side, toward another gateway, wondering why nobody used it. The answer was manifest as a figure approached. He was surrounded by servants, some carrying a canopy. All were dressed in blue and silver, matching their leader, who stood a good head taller than the others.

 And he gave off a BioChromatic aura like Vivenna had never seen--though, admittedly, she’d only been able to see them for a few hours. The bubble of enhanced color around him was enormous--it extended some thirty feet on either side.

 To her senses granted by the First Heightening, the god’s Breath registered as infinite. Undistinguishable. Something outside the understanding of even her Heightenings. For the first time, Vivenna could see that there was something different about Returned. They weren’t like Awakeners. They were alien.

 The god entered the arena through the open gateway Vivenna had noticed before. And, as she watched him, her awe wore off. There was an arrogance to this man’s posture, a dismissiveness about the way he entered freely while others waited their turn at a small, cramped opening. Even Vivenna’s father, the king, displayed no such haughtiness.

 To keep him alive, Vivenna thought, he has to absorb a person’s Breath each week.

 Her awe slowly turned to revulsion. Color and beauty couldn’t cover up such lavish conceit, nor could it hide parasitic sins. There was nothing wrong with BioChroma, and nothing evil about being a Returned. It was the way the Hallandren people used such things that were wrong.

 The god disappeared into the arena. Vivenna waited, thinking for a time on her own BioChroma and what it meant. She was completely shocked, then, when a man beside her suddenly lifted off the ground.

 She started, spinning, as the man was rose into the air, lifted--apparently--by his overly long cloak. The cloth was stiff, looking a little like a hand as it held the man up high so he could look over the crowd.

 How does it do that? she wondered. She’d been told that Breath could give life to objects, but what did that even mean? It seemed as if each of the threads in the cloak were taught, like muscles. Still, how did it manage to lift something so much heavier than it was?

 The man lowered to the ground. He said something Vivenna couldn’t hear, and his BioChromatic aura grew stronger as he drew his Breath back from the cloak. The cloth fluttered back behind him, lifeless again.

 “We should be moving again soon,” the man said to his friends.

 Indeed, soon the crowd started to progress again--apparently, whatever had been clogging it had gotten out of the way. It wasn’t long before Vivenna and Peprin entered the arena itself. They scanned the four rows of stone benches, selecting a place that wasn’t too crowded, and made their way up to it. Peprin babbled something about needing to get a cloak like the one they’d seen outside, but Vivenna ignored him. She was too busy searching the individual boxes above them.

 It didn’t take long to find Siri. The arena, ornate though it was, really wasn’t all that big. Peprin trailed off, apparently noticing what Vivenna had seen. “Wow,” he finally whispered. “She’s changed.”

 My. . .sister, Vivenna thought with a chill. My baby sister.

 Siri was dressed in a scandalous golden dress that didn’t even come down to her knees in the front. It had a neckline that plunged several inches too low as well. Siri’s hair, which even she should have been able to keep a dark brown, was instead the golden yellow of enjoyment, and it had been woven with deep red ribbons. She was being attended by dozens of servants.

 “Look what they’ve done to her,” Vivenna said. “She must be frightened senseless, forced to wear something like that, forced to keep her hair a color that matches her clothing. . . .” Forced to be slave to the God King’s whims.

 “Yeah,” Peprin said. “Though, I mean, you expected all of that, right?”

 Vivenna nodded. She had. But, it was different to actually see the things she had imagined. Siri was being exploited, they were carrying her around and showing her off like some kind of victory trophy for the Hallandren people. It seemed like they simply wanted to show off the fact that they could take a chaste, innocent Idris woman and do whatever they wished with her.

 Seeing her sister treated that way roused every protective instinct Vivenna had, irritating her already swollen feelings of guilt.

 I should have been able to stop this, she thought. I should have been able to keep Siri safe in Idris.

 The poor child probably had no idea what was going on. She would soon become a vortex of politics and intrigue in T’Telir. The priests and gods would chew her up.

 What I’m doing is right, Vivenna thought. Coming to Hallandren was the best thing to do. Lemks might be dead, but I have to press onward. I have to find a way. I can’t let them corrupt my sister.

 I have to save her.

 “Vivenna?” Peprin said.

 “Hum?” Vivenna asked a bit distracted.

 “Why is everyone starting to bow?”

#

 Siri played idly with one of the tassels on her dress. The final God was seating himself in his pavilion. That’s twenty-five, she thought. It should be all of them.

 Suddenly, out in the audience, people began to rise, then kneel themselves to the ground. Siri frowned, standing up, looking across the stadium.

 She didn’t see anything. What was she missing? Had the God King arrived, or was this something else? Even the Gods had risen and gone down on their knees, though they didn’t bow themselves down as far as the people.

 And they all seemed to be bowing toward Siri. Some sort of ritual greeting for their new queen?

 Then she saw it. The colors of her dress grew brighter, the stone at her feet gained luster, and her very skin became more vibrant. In front of her, a white serving bowl began to shine, then it seemed to stretch, the white color splitting into the colors of the rainbow.

 A serving women tugged on Siri’s sleeve from where she knelt below. “Vessel,” the woman whispered, “behind you!”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifteen

 Breath catching in her chest, Siri turned on hesitant feet. And she found him standing behind her, though she had no idea how he had arrived. There was no entrance from behind, just the stone wall.

 He wore white. She hadn’t expected that--she’d assumed he would wear black, like the color of the bed chamber. Something about his BioChroma made the pure white split, breaking it into rainbows around him--like light passing through a prism. His clothing seemed to stretch out, forming a rainbow shaped like his robes in a colorful aura around him.

 And he was young. Far younger than her shadowed meetings with him at night had prepared her for. He had supposedly reigned in Hallandren for decades--yet, the man standing behind her couldn’t be more than twenty, if even that old.

 She stared at him, awed, mouth opening slightly, and any words she had thought to say now escaped her. This man was a God. The very air distorted before him, splitting into rainbows of color. How could she have not seen it at night? How could she possibly have treated him as she had? She felt like a fool.

 He regarded her, expression flat and unreadable, face so controlled that it reminded Siri of Vivenna. Vivenna. She should have been the one standing before the God King. She was a far better princess than Siri. She wouldn’t have been so belligerent. She would have deserved marriage to such a majestic creature.

 The serving woman hissed quietly, tugging again at Siri’s dress. Belatedly, Siri dropped to her knees on the stone, long dress train flapping slightly in the wind behind her.

#

 Blushweaver knelt obediently on the cushion her servants provided. Lightsong, however, remained standing. He looked across the stadium toward a man he could barely see. The God King wore white, as he often did, for dramatic effect. He had so much BioChromatic Breath that he could even draw color from something colorless.

 Blushweaver glanced up at Lightsong.

 “Why do we kneel?” Lightsong asked.

 “That’s our king!” Blushweaver hissed. “Kneel down, fool.”

 “What will happen if I don’t?” Lightsong said. “They can’t execute me. I’m a God.”

 “You could hurt our cause!”

 Our cause? Lightsong thought. One meeting and I’m already part of her plans?

 But, he wasn’t so foolish that he would earn the God King’s ire. Who was he to risk his perfect life, full of people who would carry his chair through the rain and shell his nuts for him? He knelt down on his own cushion. The Gods did not bow so far as the regular people, but they did acknowledge their superior.

 The God King’s superiority was rather arbitrary. Of course, so was Lightsong’s divinity. Both were, in his view, part of a grand game of make-believe.

 But he’d found that the make-believe games were often the only things of real substance in people’s lives.

#

 Siri breathed quietly, kneeling on the stone before her husband. The entire arena was hushed and still. Eyes downcast, she could still see Susebron’s white-clothed feet in front of her. Even they gave off an aura of color, the white straps of his sandals bending out colorful ribbons of light.

 Finally, two piles of colorful rope hit the ground on either side of the God King. Siri glanced up as the ropes twisted with a life of their own, wrapping around the God King and pulling him into the air. His white robes fluttered as he was towed up through the space between the canopy and the back wall. Siri leaned forward, looking up as the living ropes placed her husband on a stone outcropping. He sat back into the golden throne that had been placed there. Beside him, a pair of priests--obviously Awakeners--commanded their living ropes to roll up around their arms. Then, they stepped back, out of sight.

 The God King outstretched his hand. The people stood up--their chatter beginning again--and reseated themselves. Siri’s serving women waited until she stood, then did likewise.

 Frowning to herself, Siri returned to her seat. So. . .he’s not going to sit with me, she thought. A part of her was relieved, though an equally strong part was just frustrated. She’d just been getting over her awe of being in Hallandren and being married to a God. Now, he’d gone and impressed her yet again.

 This time it was different, though. Before, she’d been quelled by the God King’s reputation. Now that she’d seen him, she could tell that there was something impressive and majestic about him. Troubled, she stared out over the crowds, barely watching as a group of priests entered the arena below.

 What was she to make of Susebron now? He couldn’t be a God. Not really. Could he?

 She’d always been taught of Austre. He was the true God of men, the one who sent the Returned. Hallandren had worshiped him as well, before the Manywar and the exile of the Royal family. That was when the Hallandren had fallen to become heretics, worshipping the Iridescent Tones--BioChromatic Breath, the Returned, and art in general. These became idyllic symbols of pagan worship.

 And yet, Siri had never seen Austre. She’d seen monks--her own sister was one. She’d been taught, and she’d learned, but what was one to make of a creature like the God King? That divine halo of color wasn’t something that she could ignore. A piece of her could understand just how the people of Hallandren--after nearly being destroyed by their enemies, then being saved by the diplomatic skills of Peacegiver the Blessed--could come to look toward the Returned for divine guidance.

 She sighed, glancing to the side as a figure walked up the steps toward her box. It was Bluefingers--hands stained with ink, characteristically scribbling away on some ledger even as he moved entered her pavilion. He glanced up at the God King, and nodded to himself, then made another annotation on his ledger.

 “I see that the God King is positioned and that you are properly displayed, Vessel,” Bluefingers said, looking over her accommodations.

 “Displayed?”

 “Of course,” Bluefingers said. “That is, after all, the main purpose of your visit here. Most of the Returned didn’t get a chance to study you in detail when you first came into the Court of the Gods. You need to be presented before them.”

 Siri shivered at the thought, trying to maintain a better posture. “Shouldn’t they be paying attention to the priests down there? Instead of studying me, I mean.”

 “Probably,” Bluefingers said, not looking up from his ledger. “But, in my experience, they rarely do what they’re supposed to.”

 Siri paused, letting the conversation lapse. Yet, there was something else she’d been meaning to ask Bluefingers about. He’d never explained his odd warning the other night. Things are not what they seem. She glanced at the scribe. “Bluefingers,” she said. “About the thing you told me the other night. The--”

 He immediately shot her a look--eyes wide and insistent--cutting her off. He immediately turned back to his ledger. The message was obvious. Not right now.

 Siri sighed, resisting the urge to slump down again. Down below, priests of various colors stood on short platforms, debating various topics. She could hear them quite well, all things considered. Yet, little of what they said made sense to her--the current debate appeared to have something to do with the way refuse and sewage was handled in the city.

 “Bluefingers,” she asked. “Are they really Gods?”

 The scribe paused, then finally looked up from his ledger. “Vessel?”

 “The Returned. Do you really think that they’re divine? That they can see the future?”

 “I. . .don’t think I’m the right one to ask about these things, Vessel. Let me fetch one of the priests for you. He can answer your questions. Just give me a--”

 “No,” Siri said, causing him to pause. “I don’t want a priest’s opinion--I want the opinion of a regular person, like you. A typical follower.”

 Bluefingers frowned. “All apologies, Vessel, but I’m not a follower of the Returned.”

 Siri cocked her head. “But you work in the palace.”

 “And you live there, Vessel. Yet neither of us worship the Iridescent Tones. You are from Idris. I am from Pahn Kahl.”

 “That’s the same as Hallandren.”

 Bluefingers raised an eyebrow, pursing his lips. “Actually, Vessel, it’s quite different.”

 “But you’re ruled by the God King.”

 “We can accept him as king without worshipping him as our God,” Bluefingers said. “That is one of the reasons why I’m a steward in the palace instead of a priest.

 His robes, Siri thought. Maybe that’s why he always wears brown.

 She turned, glancing down at the priests upon their pedestals in the sand. Each wore a different set of colors, each representing--she assumed--a different one of the Returned. “So what do you think of them?”

 “Good people,” Bluefingers said, “but misguided. A little like I think of you, Vessel.”

 She paused, then smiled, glancing at him. He, however, had already turned back to his ledgers. He wasn’t exactly the easiest man with whom to have a conversation. “But, how do you explain the God King’s radiance?” she asked.

 “BioChroma,” Bluefingers said, still scribbling, not sounding at all annoyed by her questions. He was obviously a man accustomed to dealing with interruption.

 “But the rest of the Returned don’t bend white into colors like he does, do they?”

 “No,” Bluefingers said, “indeed they do not. They, however, don’t hold the wealth of Breaths that he does.”

 “So he is different,” Siri said. “Why was he born with more?”

 “He wasn’t, Vessel. The God King’s power does not from the inherent BioChroma of being a Returned--in that, he is identical to the other Returned. However, he holds something else. The Light of Peace, they call it. A fancy word for a treasure trove of BioChromatic Breath that numbers somewhere in the tens of thousands.”

 Tens of thousands? Siri thought. “That many?”

 Bluefingers nodded distractedly. “The God Kings are said to be the only ones to ever achieve the Tenth Heightening. That is what makes light fracture around him; it is less a symbol of divinity, and more a simple function of holding so much Breath.”

 “But where did he get it?”

 “The largest bulk of it was originally gathered by Peacegiver the Blessed,” Bluefingers said. “He is said to have collected thousands of Breaths during the days of the Manywar. He then passed those on to the first Hallandren God King. That inheritance of Breaths has been transferred from father to son for centuries--and has been enlarged by each successive king, since the God King is each given two Breaths a week, instead of the one that regular Returned receive.”

 “Oh,” Siri said, sitting back, finding herself oddly disappointed by the news. She should have been happy to hear it. Susebron was not a god, he was simply a man with far more BioChroma than normal.

 But. . .what of the Returned themselves? Siri folded her arms again, staring out over the stadium floor, but not really paying much attention to the priests. She’d never been forced to look objectively at what she believed. Austre was simply. . .well, God. You didn’t question people when they talked about God. The Returned were usurpers, who had cast the followers of Austre out of Hallandren and had deposed the Royal family.

 And yet, the Returned themselves were so majestic. She had to acknowledge that--and in doing so, she was left wondering about other things. Why had the Royal family been cast out of Hallandren? She knew the official story taught in Idris--that the Royals hadn’t supported the conflicts that led up to the Manywar. Her family had supported peace, instead of destruction. For that, the people had revolted against them--and that revolt had been led by Klad the Usurper.

 Klad. Though Siri had avoided most of her tutorial sessions, even she knew the stories of that man. He was the one who had led the people of Hallandren in the heresy of building Lifeless. He had taught them the original process by which a body could be reanimated using a single BioChromatic Breath. Each person in a kingdom could then, effectively, become two soldiers--he could hold a sword in his own hand, then give away his Breath to restore a semblance of life to the body of a dead man.

 She still considered Lifeless to be a terrible perversion of what was right. She hadn’t, at least, seen any Lifeless in the palace.

 Klad had created a powerful army of the creatures, one the likes of which had never been seen again in the land. She didn’t know a lot about it. Klad’s Lifeless had been more dangerous somehow, but that was all she remembered.

 He’d eventually been defeated by Peacegiver, who had then ended the Manywar through diplomacy. Yet, Peacegiver had not restored Hallandren to its rightful rulers. Idris histories claimed betrayal and treachery. The monks spoke of heresies that were too deeply ingrained into the Hallandren people by that time.

 Yet, surely the Hallandren people had their own story of events. Watching the Returned in their pavilions made Siri wonder. One fact seemed obvious to her. Things in Hallandren were a whole lot less terrible than she had been taught.

#

 Vivenna shivered, cringing as the people in their colorful outfits crowded around her.

 Things here are worse, even, than my tutors said, she thought, wiggling in her seat. Peprin seemed engrossed by the arguing priests on the floor of the arena, and Vivenna found herself feeling annoyed at him. Perhaps he just couldn’t see the colors as well as she could, and therefore wasn’t as distracted by them.

 She still couldn’t decide if she thought the Breath she held to be horrible or wonderful. More and more, she was coming to realize that it was horrible because of how wonderful it felt. The more people that surged around her in the arena, the more overwhelmed she felt.

 Surely if Peprin could sense the sheer scope of all those colors, he wouldn’t gawk so dumbly at the costumes. Surely if he could feel the people, as well as hear and see them, he would feel boxed in like she did, unable to breathe.

 That’s it, she thought. I’ve seen Siri, and I know what they’ve done with her. It’s time to go. She stood, turning, and froze.

 A man was standing two rows back, and he was staring directly at Vivenna. She normally wouldn’t have paid him any attention. He was wearing ragged brown clothing, ripped in places, his loose trousers tied by a simple rope. He wore facial hair that was half-way between being a beard and scruff. His hair was unkempt, and came down to his shoulders.

 And he created a bubble of color around him that bespoke his holding enough BioChromatic Breath to reach nearly to the Fifth Heightening. He stared at her, meeting her eyes, and she had a sudden and awful panicked sense that he knew who she was.

 She stumbled back a bit, but the strange man didn’t take his eyes off of her. He shifted, pushing back his cloak and exposing the large, black-hilted sword at his belt. Few people in Hallandren wore weapons. This man didn’t seem to care. The people to the sides gave him a wide berth, and Vivenna swore she could sense something about that sword. It seemed to darken the colors around it. Deepen them. Make tans into browns, reds into maroons, blues into navies.

 “Peprin,” she said, more sharply than she’d intended. “We’re leaving.”

 “But--”

 “Now,” Vivenna said, turning and walking away, head bowed. She could still feel the man watching her. Something about her newfound BioChroma whispered to her that his eyes were upon her. Now that she realized it, she understood that his eyes on her were probably what had made her so uncomfortable in the first place.

 The tutors spoke of this, she thought as she and Peprin made their way to one of the stone exit passages. Life sense, the ability to tell when there are people nearby, and to tell when they’re watching you. Everyone has it in a small amount. BioChroma enhances that.

 As soon as they entered the passage, the sense of the man watching her vanished, and Vivenna let out a relieved breath.

 “I don’t see why you wanted to leave, Vivenna,” Peprin said.

 “Don’t get sulky,” Vivenna said. “You’re far too fond of looking at those costumes and colors.”

 “I guess,” Peprin said, glancing down. “Though, I mean, I thought you might want to stay and listen. Since the priests down there were talking about Idris and all.”

 Vivenna froze. “What?”

 “At the end, right before you stood up,” Peprin said. He frowned. “I think they might be declaring war. Why’d they want to do something like that? Didn’t we just make a treaty?”

 Lord God of Colors! Vivenna thought, turning and scrambling back up into the open theater.

Warbreaker

Chapter Sixteen

 “. . .still say that we cannot possibly justify military action against Idris!” a priest yelled. The man wore blue and gold. It was Stillmark’s high priest--Lightsong couldn’t remember the man’s name. Fafad? That seemed right.

 The argument was not unexpected. Still, Lightsong leaned forward, interested. Fafad and his master, Stillmark, were both stanch traditionalists--they were very opposed to any kind of change. They tended to argue against pretty much every topic that the court considered.

 Still, they were well-respected. Stillmark was nearly as old as Blushweaver, and was known for his wisdom. Lightsong rubbed his chin.

 Arguing with Fafad was Blushweaver’s own high priestess, Inhanna. “Oh, come now,” the woman said from the sands down below. “Do we really need to have this argument again? Idris is nothing more than a rebel enclave set up inside the borders of our own kingdom! They undermine the rule of our established government.”

 “They keep to themselves,” Fafad said. “Holding lands we don’t really want anyway.”

 “Lands we don’t want?” Blushweaver’s priestess said, sputtering slightly. “They hold every single pass to the northern kingdoms! Every workable copper mine in the area! They have military garrisons within striking distance of T’Telir! And they still claim to be the rightful kings of Hallandren! You call this keeping to themselves and holding lands we don’t need?”

 Fafad fell silent, and there was a surprisingly large rumble of assent from the watching priests. Lightsong eyed them critically. “You’ve seeded the group with people sympathetic to your cause?”

 “Of course,” Blushweaver said. “But, then, so did the others. I just did a better job.”

 Lightsong clasped his hands, watching the debate. The argument continued, other priests stepping up to argue for and against an assault on Idris. It was not a new debate in the court of judgment. However, he’d never seen it become so explicit. Sanctions had been discussed. Blockades. Even some military pressure.

 But war? Nobody had said the word yet, but they all knew what the priests were discussing.

 Arguments in the court were simply meant to bring information to the Gods. The priests listened to the people and studied issues of national import, then brought them up and discussed them in the court. That way, the Gods--who didn’t have the opportunity to go out among the people--could keep up on events.

 If an issue came to head, the Gods would make their judgments. They were divided into sub-groups, each one having responsibility in a certain area. Some Gods were in charge of civic problems; others were over trade agreements and treaties.

 Some, like Lightsong, held votes regarding the use of Hallandren’s Lifeless armies. “You’re behind this, then,” he said. “This is why you wanted me to make certain to pay attention to things at court today.”

 “Behind it?” Blushweaver said sweetly. “Dear Lightsong, the priests decide the issues to be discussed. Gods don’t bother with such mundanites.”

 “I’m sure,” Lightsong said, resting back. “You need my Lifeless Commands then.”

 “Why, I wouldn’t say that,” Blushweaver said, “I just want you to be informed should you. . . .”

 She trailed off as Lightsong gave her a flat look.

 “Aw, Colors,” she swore. “Of course I need your commands, Lightsong. Why else would I go to all the trouble to get you up here watching with me? You’re a very difficult person to manipulate, you know.”

 “Nonsense,” he said. “You just have to promise me that I won’t have to do a thing, and then I’ll do anything you want--provided that anything is nothing, of course. Nothing bothers me more than doing things.”

 Blushweaver rolled her eyes. Yet, both of them fell silent as the discussion proceeded below. The arguments for attack had never been stronger. There was apparently proof of a military buildup in Idris, and the highlanders had been particularly stingy with the northern passes lately. Beyond that, there was a growing belief among the people that the Returned were weaker than they’d been in previous generations. Not less powerful in BioChroma, just less. . .divine. Less benevolent, less wise. Lightsong happened to agree.

 It had been five years since a Returned had given up his or her life to heal someone. The people were growing impatient with their gods.

 “There’s more, isn’t there?” he said. He glanced at Blushweaver, still lounging back, eating cherries with delicate fingers. “What aren’t they saying?”

 “Lightsong, dear,” she said. “You were right. Bring you to court, and it absolutely corrupts you. You start paying attention to things.”

 “I just don’t like secrets,” he said. “They tend to itch at the brain, keep you awake at nights. Engaging in politics is like pulling off a bandage, my dear--best to get the pain over with quickly.”

 Blushweaver pursed her lips. “Forced metaphor, dear.”

 “Best I can do at the moment, I’m afraid. Nothing dulls the wit more quickly than politics. Now, you were saying. . . .”

 She snorted. “I’ve told you already, Lightsong. The focus of this all--the crux of it--is that woman.”

 “The queen,” he said, glancing at the God King’s pavilion.

 “They sent the wrong daughter, you know,” Blushweaver said. “Changed plans at the last moment. They picked the youngest daughter, wrapped her up, and shipped her off instead of the eldest, who had been going through training to become queen.”

 Lightsong paused. “Clever,” he admitted.

 “Clever?” Blushweaver said. “It’s downright brilliant. Do you know what a fortune in coins we all paid these last twenty years to spy upon, study, and learn about the mindset of the eldest daughter? Those of us who thought to make a backup studied the second daughter, the one they’ve made a monk. She would have made a reasonable second choice, had the eldest fallen sick. But the youngest? Nobody gave her half a thought.”

 And so the Idris get to send a random element into court, Lightsong thought. One that upsets plans and connivings that our politicians have been working on for decades.

 It was brilliant.

 “Nobody knows anything about her,” Blushweaver said, frowning deeply. She obviously did not like being taken by surprise. “My spies in Idris say the girl is of little consequence--which makes me worry that she is even more dangerous than I’d feared.”

 Lightsong raised an eyebrow. “And you don’t think, maybe, that you might be over-reacting a tad?”

 “Oh?” Blushweaver asked. “And tell me, what would you do if you wanted to inject an agent into the court? Would you do what everyone expected you to? Or, would you set up a dummy that you can train and show off, drawing attention away from the real agent, who you can train secretly? Someone you imply is unimportant, then can send off to achieve an agenda that nobody thought to investigate?”

 Lightsong rubbed his chin. She has a point. Part of him acknowledged, however, that it was probably just the politician inside of him that thought so. Living among so many scheming people tended to make one see plots everywhere.

 And yet, real or imagined, the plot that Blushweaver suggested had a very serious chance of being dangerous. What better way to get an assassin close to the God King than to send someone to marry him? No, that would be foolish. Killing the God King would just cause Hallandren to go on the rampage.

 But, if they’d sent a woman trained in the art of skilled manipulation--a woman everyone else would underestimate, but who could secretly poison the mind of the God King. . . .

 “It’s like I said before,” Blushweaver said. “We need to be ready to act. I won’t sit and let my kingdom be pulled away from me--I won’t idly be cast out as the Royals once were. You have command of one fourth of the Lifeless in the royal army. That’s five thousand soldiers who don’t need to eat, and who can march tirelessly. If we convince the other three Returned with Commands to join us. . . .”

 Lightsong thought for a moment, then nodded. And then, he stood.

 “What are you doing?” Blushweaver asked, sitting up.

 “I think I’ll go for a stroll,” Lightsong said.

 “Where?”

 Lightsong glanced over at the queen.

 “Oh, blessed colors,” Blushweaver said with a sigh. “Lightsong, do not ruin this. We walk a very delicate line, here.”

 “I’ll do my best.”

 “I don’t suppose I can talk you out of interacting with her?”

 “My dear,” Lightsong said, glancing backward. “There’s one thing you’ve insured with all of this. That queen just became a thousand times more fascinating to me than anyone else in court. I at least have to chat with her. Nothing would be more intolerable than being overthrown by a person with whom I’d never had a nice conversation.”

#

 Bluefingers wandered off sometime during the discussion on Idris. This discussion--for the first time during Siri’s visit to the court--drew her attention.

 She wasn’t exactly sure what they were talking about. Military action? Surely they couldn’t be thinking about attacking Idris? Yet, even as the discussion wrapped up and the priests moved onto another topic, Siri found herself confused at what had just happened.

 She turned to one of her serving women. “What was that about?”

 The woman glanced down, not answering.

 “They sounded like they were discussing war,” Siri said. “They wouldn’t actually talk about attacking my homeland thought, would they?”

 The woman shuffled uncomfortably, then glanced at one of her companions. That woman rushed away. A few moments later, she returned with Tridees, the God King’s High Priest. Siri frowned slightly. She did not like speaking with the man.

 “Yes, Vessel?” the tall man said, eyeing her with his usual air of distain.

 She swallowed, refusing to be intimidated. “The priests,” she said, pointing. “What were they just discussing?”

 “Your homeland of Idris, Vessel.”

 “I know that much,” Siri said. “What do they want with Idris?”

 “It seemed to me, Vessel, that they were arguing about whether or not to attack the rebel province and bring it back under governmental control.”

 “Rebel province?” Siri asked.

 “Yes, Vessel. Your people are seen as being in a state of rebellion from the rest of the kingdom.”

 “But you rebelled against us!” she said.

 Tridees raised an eyebrow.

 Different viewpoints on history indeed, Siri thought. Still, it was shocking to hear it stated so simply. In the eyes of this man, apparently, the Idris people were simply an unruly faction waiting to be quelled.

 “I can see how somebody might think like you do,” Siri said, glancing back at the priests. “But. . .you wouldn’t really attack us, would you? We haven’t done anything to you. In fact, we sent you a queen, just like you demanded. The next God King will have Royal blood.”

 Assuming the current God King ever decides to consummate our wedding. . . .

 She continued. “That means we’re related now. The two peoples should be getting along better, not worse. Why would they be contemplating war?”

 Tridees simply shrugged. “It is likely nothing, Vessel. The priests debate matters that are being discussed by the people of the city. I doubt anything will come of it. The Gods simply needed to be appraised of the current political climate of T’Telir.”

 His words didn’t make Siri much more comfortable. She shivered. Surely they wouldn’t attack, not with her as their queen. But. . .what would it mean for her if they did? Should she be doing something? Trying to explain that Idris wasn’t a threat to them?

 “Vessel,” Tridees said.

 She glanced at the man, who still stood stiffly beside her chair, his tall peaked hat brushing the top of the canopy.

 “Yes?” she asked.

 In a city full of colors and beauty, for some reason Tridees’s long face seemed even bleaker for the contrast. “There is a matter of some delicacy I fear that I must discuss with you.”

 “All right. . . .”

 “You are familiar with the nature of a monarchical civil structure such as our own,” he said. “You come from a similar background yourself. Therefore, you must know that the most important force for stability in our government is a secure succession plan for the throne.”

 “I guess.”

 “Therefore,” Tridees said, “it is of no small importance that an heir be provided as quickly as possible.”

 Siri blushed. “We’re working on that.”

 “With all due respect, Vessel,” Tridees said. “There is some measure of disagreement upon whether or not you actually are.”

 Siri blushed further, hair reddening as she glanced away from those callous eyes.

 “News of such things is, of course, not available outside of the palace,” Tridees said. “You can trust in the discretion of our staff and priests--even the other Gods have no ears inside of the God King’s inner circle.”

 “How do you know?” Siri said, looking up. “I mean, about us. Maybe we are. . .working on it. Maybe you’ll have your heir before you know it.”

 Tridees blinked once, slowly, regarding her like she were a ledger to be added up and accounted. “Vessel,” he said. “Do you honestly think that we would take an unfamiliar and foreign woman and place her in close proximity to our most holy of Gods without keeping an eye on what occurs within that chamber?”

 Siri felt her breath catch, and she had a moment of horror. Of course! she thought, flushing even more deeply. Of course they were watching. To make sure I didn’t hurt the God King, to make certain things went according to plan. These people are all about plans.

 She tried not to dwell on the thought of the priests sitting, peeking through spy holes, watching her. Being naked before her husband was bad enough. To be so exposed before men like Tridees--men who saw her not as a woman, but as an annoyance--felt even worse, somehow. She found herself slouching, arms wrapping around her chest and its overly-exposed neckline.

 “Now,” Tridees said, voice growing softer, leaning in. “We. . .understand that the God King may not be what you expected. He may even be. . .difficult to work with. However, you are a woman. You know how to use you charms to motivate.”

 “How can I ‘motivate’ if I can’t talk to him or look at him?” she snapped.

 “I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Tridees said. “You only have one task in this palace, Vessel. Your every whim will be seen to, your ever desire met. All we ask is that you perform this single duty. Give us an heir. Give the kingdom stability. Not everything in Hallandren is as. . .cohesive as it may appear to you at first.”

 Siri remained slouched down, not looking at Tridees.

 “I see that you understand,” he said. “I feel that. . . .” he trailed off, noticing something at about the same time that Siri did. A procession was approaching. It was gold and red, and a figure at the front caused it all to shine with vibrant color.

 The procession turned, walking up the stone walkway toward Siri’s pavilion. Tridees frowned, then glanced at her. “We will speak further, if it becomes necessary. Do your duty, Vessel. Or there will be consequences.”

 With that, the priest withdrew.

#

 She didn’t look dangerous. That, more than anything else, made Lightsong inclined to believe Blushweaver’s concerns.

 I’ve been in the court for far too long, he thought, sighing to himself as he smiled pleasantly to the queen. All my life, actually.

 She was a small thing, much younger than he had expected. Barely a woman. She looked rather intimidated as he nodded his head to her, waiting while Llarimar and his priests arranged his furniture. Then, he sat down, accepting some grapes from the queen’s serving women, even though he wasn’t hungry.

 “Your majesty,” he said. “It is a pleasure to meet with you, I’m sure.”

 The girl paused. “You’re sure?”
 “Figure of speech my dear,” Lightsong said. “A rather redundant one--which is quite appropriate, since I am a rather redundant person.”

 The girl cocked her head slightly. Colors, Lightsong thought, remembering that she’d just finished with her period of isolation. I’m probably the first regular Returned that she’s ever met. Talk about a bad first impression.

 Still, there was nothing to be done about it. Lightsong was who he was. Whoever that was.

 “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, your Grace,” the queen said slowly. She paused as a serving woman whispered his name to her. “Lightsong the Brave, Lord of Heroes,” she said, smiling at him.

 There was a hesitance about her. Either she had not been trained for formal situations--witch Lightsong found difficult to believe, since she’d been raised in a royal palace--or she was a rather good actress. He frowned inwardly.

 On the outside, he simply gave her his third most charming smile and popped a grape into his mouth. “No need to be so formal, your majesty. You will soon realize that among Returned, I am by far the least. If cows could Return, they’d undoubtedly be higher ranked than I.”

 She paused again, obviously uncertain how to deal with him. It was a common reaction.

 “Might I inquire as to the nature of your visitation?” the queen asked.

 Too overly formal. Not at ease. Uncomfortable around those high ranked. Could this woman was possibly be being genuine with him? Or, was it an act to put him at ease, to make him think less of her? To make him underestimate her?

 Colors take you, Blushweaver! he thought. I really don’t want part of this.

 He almost stood and withdrew. But, then, that wouldn’t be very pleasant of him--and contrary to some of the things he said, Lightsong did like being pleasant. Best to be kind, he thought, smiling idly to himself. That way, if she ever does manage to take over the kingdom, perhaps she’ll behead me last.

 “You ask after the nature of my visitation?” Lightsong said. “I believe it has no nature, your majesty, other than to be natural--at which, I believe, I have already failed by staring at you for far too long and thinking to myself about your place in this mess.”

 The queen frowned again.

 Lightsong popped another grape in his mouth. “Wonderful things,” he said, holding up another one. “Delightfully sweet, wrapped in their own little package. Deceptive, really. So rough and course on the outside, but so delectable on the inside. Don’t you think?”
 “We. . .don’t have many grapes in Idris, your grace,” she said.

 “I’m rather the opposite, you know,” he said. “Fluffy and pretty on the outside, but not really much of import on the inside. But, I guess that is beside the point, since it is about me--and anything about me is always beside the point. You, my dear, are a very welcome sight--much more so than a grape.”

 “I. . . . How is that, your grace?”

 “We haven’t had a queen in such a long time,” Lightsong said. “Since before my time, I believe. And, old Susebron up there really has been moping about the palace lately. Looking forlorn. It’s good he has a woman in his life.”

 “Thank you, your Grace,” the queen said.

 “You do seem a little boring, however.”

 She fell silent.

 Well, then, that’s it, he thought, sighing. Blushweaver was right. I probably shouldn’t have come.

 “All right,” the queen said, hair suddenly turning red as she threw her hands up in the air. “What is going on here?”

 He paused. “Your majesty?”

 “Are you making fun of me?”

 “Probably,” he said.

 “But you’re supposed to be a God!” she said, leaning back, staring up at the canopy. “Just when I thought things in this city were staring to make sense, the priests start yelling at me, then you come along! What am I supposed to do about you? Banter? You seem more like a schoolboy than you do a God!”

 Lightsong paused, then settled back into his seat, smiling. “You have me found out,” he said, opening his hands. “I killed the real God and took his place. I’ve come to hold you ransom for your sweets.”

 “There,” the queen said, pointing. “You’re doing it again! Aren’t you supposed to be. . .I don’t know, distinguished or something?”

 He spread his hands out. “My dear, this is what goes for being distinguished in Hallandren.”

 She paused.

 “I am, of course, lying through my teeth,” he noted, eating another grape. “You shouldn’t really base your opinion of the others upon what you think of me. They’re all much more deific than I am.”

 The queen sat back. “I thought you were the god of bravery.”

 “Technically,” he said.

 “You seem more like the god of jesters to me.”

 “I’ve applied for the position and been turned down,” he said. “You should see the person they have doing the job. Dull as a rock and twice as ugly.”

 Siri paused.

 “I wasn’t lying that time,” Lightsong said. “Mirthgiver, God of Laughter. If ever there was a God more poorly suited to his position than I, it would be Mirthgiver.”

 “I don’t understand you,” she said frankly. “It appears there’s a lot I don’t understand in this city.”

 This woman is no fake, Lightsong thought, staring into her youthful, confused eyes. Or, if she is, then she’s far better than any I’ve ever met.

 That meant something. Something important. It was possible there were mundane reasons this girl had been sent instead of her sister. Sickness on the part of the elder daughter, perhaps. But Lightsong didn’t buy that. She was part of something. A plot, or perhaps several. And, whatever those plots were, it was apparently important for her to be ignorant and untested.

 Colors! Lightsong thought. This child is going to get ripped apart and fed to the wolves.

 But what could he really do about it? He sighed, standing, causing his priests to begin packing his things. He had, by his own choice, little part in the politics of court. If this child were ignorant of the plots she moved amongst, then he was hardly any better.

 The girl watched with confusion as he nodded to her, giving her a wan smile of farewell. She stood and curtseyed slightly, though she probably didn’t need to. She was his queen, even if she wasn’t herself Returned.

 Lightsong turned to go, then paused. He reached over, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t let them get to you, child,” he whispered.

 And with that, he withdrew.

Warbreaker

Chapter Seventeen

 Vivenna walked quietly, thoughtful, trying to make sense of the argument she’d heard back at the Court of Gods. Was Hallandren going to war with Idris or not? She couldn’t decide how the discussion had gone. Which of the priests had made the best point?

 She walked with her head down. Fortunately, the street around her was practically was empty, and so she didn’t have to push her way through crowds. She was beginning to learn that she could avoid the masses by staying off of the main streets and walking through more residential sections of the city. It appeared that most people in T’Telir liked to be where everybody else was.

 Today, following the arguments at court, she found herself wandering through one of the city’s richer neighborhoods. The homes were slightly larger than what she’d seen before, and there was more space between them--though not enough to make the homes seem like mansions. In Idris, each would have been considered a palace, but here they were only of modest size--probably the homes of successful merchants and the like.

 That meant the street was rich enough to have a cobbled sidewalk running along the side of it, something she’d never seen back in Idris. It made for pleasant walking, even though Peprin sauntered beside her, occasionally pausing to admire the ferns and palm trees that had been planted alongside. The Hallandrens liked their plants; most of the homes along the street were shaded by trees, vines, and exotic blooming shrubs.

 The beautiful plants did little to calm Vivenna’s uneasiness. In fact, they were just another symbol of what was wrong with her life recently. She knew that they were a sign of ostentation. They had been planted to draw attention, making the houses look more lavish than one another. And yet, the cool shade the plants offered, the way they beautified the street. . . .

 Stay focused! she told herself. I need to decide if the Hallandren are going to attack or not.

 She understood the structure of the court, of course--the tutors had made certain to train her in that. She knew that the gods made the final decisions. Yet, they usually voted in favor of the priests who were perceived as to having ‘won’ a particular argument.

 But who had won?

 She shook her head again. The longer she stayed in T’Telir, the more she realized that her training and tutorials hadn’t prepared her half as well as she’d assumed. She should have been able to judge the climate of the court following the priests’ arguments, but she’d been completely lost. She should know if the debate had real political weight, or if it was just the result of idle arguing. Yet, she could not decide.

 She felt as if she knew nothing. And that left her feeling very lost. She was not the proud, competent woman she’d assumed herself to be--and she certainly wasn’t prepared to deal with life in Hallandren. The frightening truth was, should she have been sent to become the God King’s bride, she would have turned out to be nearly as ineffective and confused as poor Siri undoubtedly was.

 They turned a corner, Vivenna trusting in Peprin’s amazing sense of direction to get them back to Lemks’ house. As they walked, they passed beneath the gaze of one of the silent D’Denir statures. The proud warrior stood with sword raised above his stone head, his armor--carved into the statue--augmented by a red scarf tied and flapping around his neck. He looked dramatic, as if he were going gloriously to war.

 Kind of like I thought of myself, Vivenna thought wryly. She had practically charged into the city, determined to save Siri and sacrifice herself for Idris.

 Soon, things around them began to look familiar. It wasn’t long before they approached the steps to Lemks’ house. Vivenna froze, however, when she saw that the door was handing from one hinge. The lower portion of its wood was cracked, as if it had been kicked very hard.

 Peprin pulled up beside her. “Hey,” he said. “Someone broke our door!”

 Vivenna stepped back, nerves itching. And yet. . .where would she go? The mercenaries were her only connection in the city, her only hope of achieving any kind of success. Denth and Tonk Fah could have handled an attack, right?

 Someone was approaching from the other side of the door. Her BioChromatic senses warned her of the proximity. She tensed, preparing to bolt.

 Denth pushed the broken door open, sticking his head out. “Oh,” he noted. “It’s you.”

 “What happened?” she asked quickly. “Were you attacked?”

 Denth frowned. Then he glanced at the door and chuckled to himself. “Nah,” he said, pushing the door open and waving her in. Through the broken door she could see that the house had been treated similarly. Furniture had been ripped apart, there were holes in the walls, and pictures were slashed and broken.

 Denth wandered back inside, kicking aside some stuffing from a cushion, making his way toward the stairs. Several of the steps had been broken.

 He glanced back, noting her confusion. “Well, we did say we were going to search the house, princess. Figured we might as well do a good job of it.”

#

 Vivenna sat down very carefully, half-expecting the chair to collapse beneath her. Tonk Fah and Denth had been very thorough in their search--they had broken every bit of wood in the house, it seemed, including chair legs. Fortunately, her current chair had been propped up reasonably well, and it held her weight.

 The desk in front of her--Lemks’ desk--was splintered in places. All of the drawers had been removed, and a false back had been revealed, the compartment emptied. A group of papers and several bags sat on the desktop.

 “That’s everything,” Denth said, leaning against the room’s door frame. Tonk Fah lounged on a broken couch, its stuffing sticking out at awkward angles. The large man stretched, yawning, as he shifted his bulk.

 “Did you have to break so much?” Vivenna asked, careful to keep her annoyance from showing in her voice or her hair.

 “Had to be certain,” Denth said, shrugging. “You’d be surprised where people hide things.”

 “Inside the front door?” Vivenna asked flatly.

 Denth just shrugged again. “Would you have thought to look there?”

 “Of course not,” Vivenna said.

 “Sounds like a pretty good hiding place to me, then.”

 “People get really clever when it comes to hiding important stuff,” Tonk Fah said with a yawn.

 “You know the thing I hate most about being a mercenary?” Denth asked, holding up a hand.

 Vivenna raised an eyebrow.

 “Splinters,” he said, wiggling several red fingers.

 “No hazard pay for those,” Tonk Fah added.

 “Oh, now you’re just being silly,” Vivenna said, sorting through the things on the table. One of the bags clinked suggestively. Vivenna paused, then undid the drawstring and pulled open the top.

 Gold glistened inside. A lot of it.

 “Little over five hundred marks worth in there,” Denth said lazily. “Lemks had it stashed all over the house. Found one bar of it in the leg of that chair you’re sitting on.”

 “Got easier to find it all when we discovered the paper he’d used to remind himself of where he hid it,” Tonk Fah noted.

 “Five hundred marks?” Vivenna said, feeling her hair lighten slightly in shock. “That’s a small fortune!”

 “Seems like old Lemks was storing up quite the little nest egg,” Denth said, chuckling. “That, mixed with the amount of Breath he held. . .makes a man wonder where exactly he was getting his funds.”

 Vivenna stared at the bag, trying to overcome her shock. Then, she looked up at Denth. “You. . .gave it to me,” she said. “You could have taken it and spent it!”

 “Actually, we did,” Denth said. “Took about ten bits for lunch. Should be here any minute.”

 Vivenna met his eyes.

 “Now there’s what I’m talking about, eh Tonks?” Denth said, glancing down at the larger man. “If I’d been, say, a butler, would she be looking at me like that? Just because I didn’t take the money and run? Why does everyone expect a mercenary to rob them?”

 Tonk Fah grunted, stretching again.

 “Look through those papers, princess,” Denth said, kicking Tonk Fah’s couch, getting the man’s attention, then nodding toward the door. “We’ll wait for you downstairs.”

 Vivenna watched them retreat, Tonk Fah grumbling as he had to rise, bits of stuffing sticking to the back of his clothing. They thumped their way down the stairs, and soon she heard dishes rattling, their food obviously having arrived. They’d likely sent one of the street boys--who passed periodically yelling that they would bring food from one of the local restaurants--for the meal.

 Vivenna didn’t move for a long moment. She was increasingly uncertain of her purpose in the city. Yet, she still had Denth and Tonk Fah, and--surprisingly--she was finding herself growing attached to them after just a short time. She wouldn’t have thought it possible, considering how she generally regarded mercenaries.

 But. . .how many soldiers in her father’s army--good men, all of them--would have been able to resist running off with those five hundred marks? Not many, she assumed. There was more to these men than they implied.

 Eventually, she turned her attention to the books, letters, and papers on the desk.

#

 Several hours later, Vivenna still sat alone at the desk, a solitary candle burning and dripping wax onto the splintered corner its wood. She had long since stopped reading. A plate of food sat uneaten by the door, brought by Peprin some time before. She hadn’t the stomach to eat.

 Letters lay spread out on the desk before her. It had taken time to put them in order. Most were penned in her father’s familiar hand.

 Not the hand of her father’s scribe. Her father’s own hand. That had been her first clue. He only wrote his most personal, or most secret, communications on his own.

 Vivenna sat, motionless, poised. She kept her hair under control. She breathed in and out. She didn’t look out the darkened window at the lights of a city that should have been asleep. She simply sat.

 Numb.

 The final letter--last in the series before Lemks’ death--sat on top of the pile. It was only a few weeks old.

 My friend, her father’s scrawl read.

 Our conversations have worried me more than I care to admit. I have spoken with Yarda at length. We can see no solution.

 War is coming. We all know that now. The continued--and increasingly vigorous--arguments in the Court of Gods show a disturbing trend. The money we sent to buy you enough Breath to attend those meetings is some of the best I have ever spent.

 All signs point to the inevitability of Hallandren troops soon marching to our mountains. And they will be Lifeless troops that we have only a small hope of defeating. Therefore, I give you leave to do as we have discussed. Any disruptions you can cause in the city--any delays you can earn us--will be extremely valuable. The additional funds you requested should have arrived by now.

 My friend, I must admit a weakness in myself. I will never be able to send Vivenna into that dragon’s nest of a city. I will not resign my most beloved daughter to becoming a hostage--which we both know was why the Hallandrens wanted this treaty in the first place. To send her would be to kill her, for I will not surrender my kingdom to protect my daughter--not even Vivenna.

 I’m not yet sure what I will do. I will not send her. However, breaking the treaty is to bring the Hallandren wrath against my people even more quickly. I fear I may have to make a very difficult decision in the days to come.

 But that is the soul of a king’s duty.

 Until we correspond again,

 Dedelin, your liege and your friend.

 Vivenna looked away from the letter. The room’s silence seemed too perfect to her. She wanted to yell, to scream at the letter and her father, who was now so far away. And yet, she could not. She had been trained for better. Tantrums were useless, not to mention ostentatious. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Don’t set yourself above others. He who makes himself high will be cast down low.

 What of he who murders one of his daughters to save the other?

 Vivenna blinked a tear in her eye, then gritted her teeth, angry at herself. It all made frightening sense to her now. The reason for the last minute switch. Her father’s reticence about letting Siri be accompanied by anyone other than a few token guards. The way he had acted the days before Siri’s departure. King Dedelin had sent his youngest child away to be taken hostage and killed.

 Even the court’s proceedings now seemed obvious to Vivenna. She’d read all of the letters in the stack, and while she didn’t have Lemks’ half of the conversation--the letters he would have sent to Idris, detailing events at the Court of Gods--she did have her father’s responses. She could figure out enough to see that today’s argument had been much more heated than previous ones.

 Someone in the Hallandren government was rallying the nation for war. And, her father and Lemks were under the impression that the general people of the city supported the action. Hallandren troops would likely march on her homeland before the year was out. And then, Siri would become a hostage. The Hallandren, so colorful yet so deceptive, would threaten to kill her unless Dedelin surrendered Idris to Hallandren rule.

 Her father would not surrender. Siri would be executed.

 And that is what I’m here to stop, Vivenna thought. Her hands grew tighter, gripping the wood of the desktop, jaw set. She brushed away the traitorous tear.

 She had been trained to be competent, to be adaptive and strong when surrounded by an unfamiliar city and people. She had work to do.

 She rose, leaving the letters on the table with the bag of coins and several other items--Lemks’ own journal, as well as several lists of contacts and plans. She made her way down the stairs, avoiding the broken steps, to where the mercenaries were teaching Peprin how to play a game with wooden cards. The remains of their meal was piled in the corner; the street boy would return eventually to collect the dishes and take them back to the restaurant.

 The three men looked up as Vivenna approached. She settled herself carefully on the floor, sitting with her legs beneath her in an unassuming posture. Yet, she met their eyes as she spoke.

 “I know where some of Lemks’ money came from,” she said. “My father is convinced that Idris and Hallandren will soon go to war. Because of this threat, he was giving much more support to Lemks than I had assumed. For instance, my father sent Lemks enough to buy fifty Breaths so that he could get into the Court and spy on proceedings there. Obviously, my father didn’t know that Lemks already had a sizable amount of Breath.”

 The three men were silent. Tonk Fah shot a glance at Denth, who sat back, resting against an overturned and broken chair.

 “I believe that Lemks was still loyal to Idris,” she said. “His personal writings make that relatively clear. He was not a traitor; he was simply greedy. He wanted as much Breath as possible because he had heard that it extended a person’s life.

 “He convinced my father that he could help Idris greatly from inside the city. He planned to undermine the rule of the Returned, promoting dissention against the government. He promised my father he would try to find a way to sabotage the Lifeless armies, making it more difficult for them to march, doing damage to their supplies and their ability to wage war. For him to accomplish this, my father sent him a large sum of money.”

 “About five hundred marks worth?” Denth asked, rubbing his chin.

 “Less than that,” Vivenna said. “But a large chunk nonetheless. I believe that you are right about Lemks, Denth--he has been extorting the crown for some time. In addition, he was playing informant in the city, selling knowledge to whomever was willing to pay. He didn’t betray Idris state secrets, thankfully, but he did sell knowledge of the things he learned in the court.”

 She fell silent. Peprin looked confused. That wasn’t uncommon. The mercenaries, however, didn’t look surprised.

 “I don’t know if Lemks actually intended to do as my father asked,” Vivenna said, keeping her voice even. “The way he hid the money, some of the things he wrote, makes me think that he was planning to finally turn traitor and run away with his fortune. We can’t know what he would eventually have decided.

 “We do, however, have a vague list of things he planned to accomplish. We can use this. Whether or not he intended to go through with his plans, they were convincing enough to persuade my father, and the urgency of his letters was enough to convince me. We are going to continue Lemks’ work, and we are going to do what we can to help Idris through the coming disaster.”

 The room fell silent. “And. . .your sister?” Peprin finally asked.

 “We will get her out,” Vivenna said firmly. She swallowed, forcing herself onward. “My father expects that Siri will be taken hostage and perhaps killed once the war arrives. We are going to make certain, as part of our plans, that she is not there to be executed.”

 “That is all easier discussed than accomplished, princess,” Denth said.

 “I know.”

 The mercenaries shared a look. “Well,” Denth finally said, standing up. “Better get back to work, then.” He nodded at Tonk Fah, who sighed and grumbled, standing.

 “Wait,” Vivenna said, frowning. “What?”

 “Lemks already had us helping on some things like this,” Denth said, stretching. “I figured once you saw those papers that you’d want to continue.”

 That’s right, she thought. Denth did mention some ‘projects’ Lemks had him and Tonk Fah working on. Projects for my father. “So Lemks did intend to go through with his plans.”

 Denth shrugged. “Yes and no. He was working on undermining Hallandren support for the war, as well as trying to sabotage the armies. He seemed to want to create unrest in the city to help keep the Hallandren gods focused inward, rather than outward. But, he also had enough money stashed away so that he’d be able to run and set himself up real nice, should things turn bad for him.”

 “Always good to have an escape plan,” Tonk Fah said.

 “And. . .you can handle something like this?” Vivenna asked. “You just said it wouldn’t be easy.”

 Denth shrugged. “Won’t be. But, we don’t ask questions. We do what we’re told. And, if you haven’t figured it out yet, this is sort of why Lemks hired us in the first place. Men like him don’t ordinarily need a team of three high-priced, specialist mercenaries. We’re not exactly the type of men you keep around to serve you tea.”

 “Unless you want the tea rammed up someplace uncomfortable,” Tonk Fah noted.

 Three mercenaries? Vivenna thought, pausing. That’s right. There’s another one. A woman. “Where’s the other member of your team?”

 “Jewels?” Denth asked. “You’ll meet her soon enough.”

 “Unfortunately,” Tonk Fah said under his breath.

 Denth elbowed his friend. “For now, let us go back out and see how things stand on our projects. Gather what you want from this house. We’ll move out tomorrow, Colors willing.”

 “Move out?” Vivenna said.

 “Unless you want to sleep on a mattress Tonk Fah ripped into five pieces,” Denth noted. “He has a thing about mattresses.”

 “And chairs,” Tonk Fah said cheerfully, “and tables, and doors, and walls, actually. Oh, and people.”

 “Either way, princess,” Denth said. “This building was well known to people who worked with Lemks. As you’ve discovered--though I believed I warned you--he wasn’t exactly the most honest fellow around. I doubt you want the baggage that comes with being associated with him.”

 “Best to move to another house,” Tonk Fah agreed.

 “We’ll try not to break up the next one quite so badly,” Denth said.

 “No promises though,” Tonk Fah said with a wink.

 And then the two of them were gone.

Warbreaker

Chapter Eighteen

 Siri stood before the door to her husband’s bed chambers, shuffling nervously, waiting for the proper hour to arrive. As usual, Bluefingers stood beside her, and he was the only other one in the hallway. He scribbled on his pad, giving no indication how he always knew when it was time for her to enter.

 For once, she didn’t mind the delay, nervous though she was. It gave her more time to think about what she was going to do.

 The day’s events still buzzed about in her head. Tridees, telling her that she needed to provide an heir. Lightsong the Bold, talking in circles and offering little but confusion--then leaving her with what had seemed like a heartfelt farewell. Her king and husband, sitting on his tower above, bending light around him. The priests below, arguing about whether or not to invade her homeland.

 It seemed a lot of people wanted to shove her in different directions. Yet, none of them were really willing to tell her how to do what they wanted--and some didn’t even bother to tell her what their goals were in the first place. In truth, the only thing they were really succeeding at was making her annoyed.

 She was not a seductress. She had no idea how to make the God King do as the priests wanted--particularly since the thing that they wanted was the thing she feared the most. She didn’t know what people needed of her, and she didn’t particularly want to do what she was told.

 The decision had come to her as she had sat in her bath, being prepared for this evening’s presentation. She was annoyed and tired. Fortunately, High Priest Tridees had at least told her what he wanted her to do. He’d given her a command.

 That was never a good idea, where Siri was concerned.

 So, she’d show him how she responded to commands. Tonight, she would go into the king’s bed chamber, sit down on the floor, and refuse to strip. She’d confront the God King with her defiance. He didn’t want her. Well, she was tired of lying down before him and being ogled every night. She intended to explain this all to him in no uncertain terms.

 If he wanted to see her naked any more, he’d have to order servants in to force her clothing off. Yet, somehow she doubted that he’d do that. He’d made no move toward her. Even during his reign over the court proceedings earlier, he hadn’t done more than sit and watch.

 She was getting a new image in her head of this king. He was a man with so much power, he had grown lazy. He was a man who had everything, and so he bothered with nothing. He was a man who liked others to do everything for him. People like him annoyed her--she had known some of them back in Idris. Captains of the guard who had insisted making their men work hard, but who spent the afternoons playing cards.

 It was time the God King was defied by someone. More than that, it was time that his priests learned that they couldn’t simply bully her as much as they wanted to. She was tired of being used. Tonight, she would react. That was her decision. And it made her nervous as all Colors.

 She glanced at Bluefingers. Eventually, she caught his eye. “Do they really watch me each night?” she asked, leaning in and whispering.

 He paused, paling slightly. Then, he glanced to either side, then shook his head.

 She frowned. But, Tridees knew that I hadn’t been bedded by the God King.

 Bluefingers raised a finger, pointing to his eyes, then shook his head. Then, he pointed to his ears and nodded. He pointed to a doorway down the hall. Its wall would abut that of the king’s bed chamber, on the side of the bed itself.

 They listen, Siri thought.

 Bluefingers leaned in closer. “Watching the. . .event would be too much even for them, Vessel,” he whispered very quietly. “Remember, the God King is their most holy of deities. Watching him in his nudity, watching him with his wife. . .no, they wouldn’t dare. However, they aren’t above listening to make certain the event is happening.”

 She nodded. “They are very concerned about an heir.”

 Bluefingers glanced about nervously.

 “Am I really in danger from them?” she asked.

 He met her eyes, then nodded sharply. “More danger than you know, Vessel,” he whispered, then backed away, gesturing at the doorway.

 You have to help me! she mouthed at him.
 He shook his head, holding up his hands. I cannot. Not now. With that, he pushed open the door, bowed, and scuttled away, looking nervously over his shoulder.

 Siri glared at him. The time was swiftly approaching when she’d need to corner him and find out what he really knew. Until then, she had other people to annoy.

 She turned and glanced back at the dark room. Her nerves started up again. And, she began to feel a hesitance.

 Is this wise? she thought. Things like that had never bothered her before. And yet. . .things weren’t like they were before. Bluefinger’s fear had left her even more on edge.

 Defiance. It had always been her method of gaining attention. She hadn’t been obstinate out of spite, not usually. She’d simply been unable to measure up to Vivenna, so she’d often just done the opposite of her sister--the opposite of what was expected. And she’d always done so intentionally, but without really thinking about what it would cost.

 Her defiance had worked in the past, hadn’t it? Or had it? Her father had been perpetually angry at her, and her sister had always treated her as a child who had to be suffered and instructed. The people had loved her, but their love had seemed suffering.

 No, Siri thought suddenly. No, I can’t go back to that. The people in this palace--this court--they aren’t the type of people you defy just because you’re annoyed at them. Spurn the palace priests, and they wouldn’t grumble at her like her father had. They’d show her what it really meant to be in their power.

 But what to do then? She couldn’t keep throwing off her clothing and kneeling on the floor, naked, could she?

 Feeling confused, and a little angry at herself, she stepped into the dark room, then pulled the door closed. The God King waited in his corner, shadowed as always, though the crackling hearth was built up brighter than it usually was. Siri looked at him, staring at that too-calm face. She knew that she should kneel and begin to disrobe, but she didn’t.

 Not because she felt defiant. Not even because she felt angry or petulant. As she regarded him, she simply felt herself growing more and more curious. Who was this man who could rule gods and bend light with the force of his BioChroma?

 He stared back at her. Like before, he didn’t call for guards or grow angry at her because of her insolence. Still watching him, Siri pulled at the strings on her dress, dropping the bulky garment to the floor. She reached for the shoulders of her shift, but paused.

 No, she thought. This isn’t right either.

 She glanced down, looking at the shift. Now that she took the time to notice, she could see that the edges of the white garment were fuzzing slightly, the white bending into color. She looked up at the God King’s impassive face.

 Then--gritting her teeth against her nervousness--she took a step forward.

 He tensed slightly. She could see it in the edges of his eyes and around his lips. She took another step forward, the white of her garment bending further into prismatic colors. The God King--as she’d guessed--didn’t do anything. He just watched her as she drew closer and closer.

 Eventually, she turned away from him. She climbed up onto the bed itself, feeling the deep softness beneath her as she crawled to the middle of its mattress. She sat up on her knees, regarding the black marble wall, with its obsidian sheen. The God King’s priest waited just beyond, listening carefully to hear things that were really none of their business.

 This, she thought, taking a deep breath, is going to be exceptionally embarrassing. But she’d been forced to lay prostrate, naked, before the God King for over a week. Was now really the time to start feeling self-conscious?

 So, she began to bounce up and down on the bed, making its springs creak. Then, cringing slightly, she started to moan.

 She hoped it was convincing. She didn’t really know what these sorts of things were supposed to sound like. And, how long did it usually continue? She wasn’t certain. So, she tried to make her moans get louder and louder, her bouncing more furious, for what she assumed was a proper amount of time. Then, she stopped sharply, let out a final moan, and fell back onto the bed.

 All was still. She glanced up, eying the God King. A bit of his emotional mask had softened, and he displayed a very human look of confusion. She almost laughed out loud at how perplexed he seemed. She just met his eyes and shook her head. Then--her heart beating, her skin a bit sweaty from her exertions--she laid back on the bed.

 It wasn’t long after that--tired of the day’s events and intrigues--she found herself rolled up in the luxurious comforter and dozing soundly. The God King left her alone, and as she drifted off, she considered something.

 When she’d been approaching, he’d grown tense. Almost as if he were. . .frightened of her. But, that couldn’t be. He was the God and King of the Hallandren people, and she was just a silly girl, swimming in water that was far over her head.

 No, he wasn’t frightened. The concept was enough to make her again feel like laughing. She kept it in, however, maintaining the illusion for the listening priests as she drifted off in the comfort of the bed.

#

 The next morning, Lightsong did not get out of bed.

 His servants stood around the perimeter of his room, like a flock of birds waiting for seed that never came. As noon approached, they began to shuffle uncomfortably, shooting glances at one another, wondering if something was wrong with their God.

 He remained in bed. Not really sleeping, just staring up at the ornate red canopy. Some servants approached tentatively, placing a tray of food atop a pedestal beside him. Lightsong did not reach for it. He just continued to stare.

 Finally, a figure approached. Large of girth and draped in his priestly robes, Llarimar looked down at his God, betraying none of the annoyance that Lightsong was sure that he felt.

 “Leave us, please,” Llarimar finally said to the servants.

 They glanced at each other, uncertain. When was a God without his servants?

 “Please,” Llarimar repeated, though somehow his tone indicated that it was not a request. Slowly, uncertainly, the servants filed from the room.

 Llarimar moved the tray of food, then sat down on the stool it had covered. He studied Lightsong, expression thoughtful.

 What did I ever do to earn a priest like him? Lightsong thought. He knew many of the high priests of other Returned, and most of them were various levels of insufferable. Tridees, the God King’s own high priest, was so stuck up that he made even Gods feel inferior. And, while Tridees was the worst, the others were almost as bad. Some were easy to bring to anger, others quick to point out fault, and still others were so effusive toward their gods that it was downright maddening.

 And then there was Llarimar. Patient, bafflingly understanding. He deserved a better god.

 “All right, your grace,” Llarimar said. “What is it this time?”

 “I’m sick,” Lightsong said.

 “You can’t get sick, your grace.”

 Lightsong gave a few weak coughs, to which Llarimar just rolled his eyes.

 “Oh come on, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “Can’t you just play along a little bit.”

 “Play along and pretend that you are sick?” Llarimar asked, showing a hint of amusement. “Your grace, to do that would be to pretend that you’re not a God. I do not believe that’s a good precedent for your high priest to be setting.”

 “It’s not far from the truth, Llarimar,” Lightsong whispered. “I’m no God.”

 Again, there was no sign of annoyance or anger from Llarimar. He just leaned down. “Please don’t say such things, your grace. Even if you yourself believe them, you should not say them.”

 “Why not?”

 “Because there are those who do believe. Many of them.”

 “And I should continue to deceive them?”

 Llarimar shook his head. “It is no deception. It’s not so uncommon for others to have more faith in you than you have in yourself.”

 “And doesn’t that strike you as a little odd?”

 Llarimar smiled. “Not knowing your temperament, it doesn’t. Now, what brought this on, your grace?”

 Lightsong turned, looking up at the ceiling again. “Blushweaver wants my Commands for the Lifeless.”

 “Yes.”

 “She’ll destroy that new queen of ours,” Lightsong said. “Blushweaver is worried that the Idris Royals are making a play for the Hallandren throne.”

 “Do you disagree?”

 Lightsong paused, then shook his head. “No. They probably are. But, the thing is, I don’t think the girl--the queen--knows that she’s part of anything. And I’m worried that Blushweaver will crush the child out of fear.”

 “It seems that you have a remarkably good handle on this all, your grace,” Llarimar said. “Particularly for someone who claims that he knows nothing of politics.”

 “I don’t want to be part of it, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “I feel myself getting sucked in.”

 “You are a political being, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It is your duty as a God of Hallandren to be involved in these things, so that you can lead your kingdom. You can’t help be part of politics.”

 “I can avoid it if I don’t get out of bed.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow. “You don’t honestly believe that, do you your grace?”

 Lightsong sighed. “You’re not going to give me a lecture about how even my inaction affects politics, are you?”

 Llarimar paused. “Perhaps. You are a part of the workings of this kingdom--and you produce effects even if you stay in bed. If you do nothing, then the problems are as much your fault as if you had caused them.”

 “No,” Lightsong said. “No, I think you’re wrong. If I don’t do anything, then at least I can’t be blamed for causing problems. I can’t ruin things. Sure, I can let them go wrong, but that’s not the same thing. It really isn’t, no matter what people say.”

 “And if, by acting, you could make things better?”

 Lightsong shook his head. “Not going to happen. You know me better than that.”

 “I do, your grace,” Llarimar said. “I know you better, perhaps, than you think I do. You’ve always been one of the best men I have ever known.”

 Lightsong rolled his eyes, but then paused, noting the expression on Llarimar’s face.

 Best men I have ever known. . . .

 Lightsong sat up. “You knew me!” he accused. “That’s why you chose to be my priest. You did know me before! Before I died!”

 Llarimar said nothing.

 “Who was I?” Lightsong asked. “A good man, you claim. What was it about me that made me a good man?”

 “I can say nothing, your grace.”

 “You’ve already said something,” Lightsong said, raising a finger. “You might as well go on. No turning back.”

 “I’ve said too much already.”

 “Come on,” Lightsong said. “Just a little bit. Was I from T’Telir, then? How did I die?” Who is she, the woman I see in my dreams?

 Llarimar, however, said nothing further.

 “I could command you, as your God, to speak. . . .” Lightsong said.

 “No you couldn’t,” Llarimar said, smiling as he stood up. “It’s like the rain, your grace. You can say you want to command the weather change, but you don’t believe it, deep down. It doesn’t obey, and neither would I.”

 Convenient bit of theology, that, Lightsong thought. Particularly when you want to hide things from your gods.

 Llarimar turned to go. “You have paintings waiting to be judged, your grace. I suggest that you let your servants bathe and dress you, so that you can get through the day’s work.”

 Lightsong sighed, stretching. How exactly did he just do that to me? he thought. Llarimar hadn’t really even revealed anything. Yet, Lightsong felt as if he had overcome his bout of melancholy. He eyed Llarimar as the man reached the door and waved for the servants to return. Perhaps dealing with sullen deities was part of his job description.

 But. . .he knew me before, Lightsong thought. And now he’s my priest. How did that happen?

 “Scoot,” Lightsong said, drawing the priest’s attention. Llarimar turned, guarded, obviously expecting Lightsong to pry further into his past.

 “What should I do,” Lightsong asked. “About Blushweaver and the queen?”

 “I cannot tell you, your grace,” Llarimar said. “You see, it is by what you do that we learn. If I guide you, then we gain nothing.”

 “Except perhaps the life of a young girl who is being used as a pawn.”

 Llarimar paused. “Do your best, your grace,” he said. “That is all I can suggest.”

 Great, Lightsong thought as he stood and let the servants undress him, preparing him for bathing. My best? What does that even mean? He didn’t really know what his ‘best’ was.

 The truth was, he’d never bothered to find out.

Warbreaker

Chapter Nineteen

 “This is nice,” Denth said, looking over the house. “Strong wood paneling. Will break very cleanly.”

 “Yeah,” Tonk Fah added, peeking into a cabinet. “And it has good shelf space. Bet we could fit a good half-dozen bodies in here alone.”

 Vivenna shot the two mercenaries a flat look, causing them to chuckle to themselves.

 The house wasn’t as nice as Lemks’ had been, even if it was of the same style. She didn’t want to be ostentatious. The home was one of many that were built in a row along a well-maintained street. More long than it was wide, the building was fenced on either side with large palm trees, obscuring view, should someone try to spy from the neighboring buildings.

 Overall, she was pleased with it. A piece of her worried at living in a home that was--despite being relatively modest by Hallandren standards--actually larger than the king’s palace back in Idris. However, she and Peprin had looked in cheaper sections of town. She didn’t want to live in a place where she was afraid to go out at night--particularly since she worried that her Breath might make her a target.

 Denth and Tonk Fah followed her down the stairs to the main level. The home had three stories--a small upper story with sleeping chambers, the main story with a kitchen and sitting room, and a dark cellar for storage. The entire building was sparsely furnished at the moment, though Peprin--against her wishes--had run off to find some ‘decorations’ as he put it.

 She was still worried about what he’d come back with.

 “We sent your soldiers away, as you asked,” Denth said as he clomped down the stairs. “They’ll head back to Idris with word for your father to wait and not come searching for you.”

 She nodded. Denth’s suggestion that her soldiers were too suspicious had been a good one. They deserved to return to her homeland, and Peprin had said they were getting more and more nervous waiting outside. They weren’t in on most of Vivenna’s plan--they’d simply been intended to guard her as she came down to the city, and that they had done. She could only hope her father wouldn’t be too hard on them for helping her.

 “Old Lemks’s body will soon be taken care of too,” Denth continued. “We left some hints in the underground, mentioning that the old man was dead, and that he had no relatives. Whatever we didn’t ransack, a gang of burglars will take care of tonight. By tomorrow, the city watch will be there, and they’ll take care of the corpse.”

 Vivenna paused at the bottom of the stairs, paling slightly. “That doesn’t sound very. . .respectful.”

 Denth shrugged. “What do you want to do? Go turn him in at the charnel house yourself?”

 “Good way to get people asking questions, that,” Tonk Fah said.

 “Better to just leave it alone as best we can,” Denth said. “Stay away, let others deal with it.”

 “I suppose,” Vivenna said, turning away from the stairs and walking into the sitting room. “It just sets me a little on edge, letting his body be cared for by. . . .”

 “By what?” Denth said, amused. “Heathens?”

 Vivenna didn’t look at him.

 “The old man didn’t seem to care much about heathen ways,” Tonk Fah noted. “Not with the number of Breaths he held. Of course, didn’t your daddy give him the money to buy them?”

 Vivenna closed her eyes. She’d been trying not to think too much about that fact.

 Her father’s betrayal of Siri still shocked her. A piece of her could hope, however, that he planned to rescue her. Perhaps he intended to get her out somehow, before the war came. And, even if Siri were killed. . .well, the murder would be performed by evil men, not by her father. It could be claimed he was simply trying to keep his word and follow the treaty.

 But what of the Breaths?

 The king had sent Lemks enough money to buy fifty Breaths. That went against all of the most holy teachings of Austrism. It was like. . .sending money to a rapist so that they could go buy ropes to bind his victims. It didn’t feel right.

 You hold those same Breaths, she told herself. You’re not innocent in all of this, either.

 She hadn’t been given a choice as to whether or not to take those Breaths. She could only hope and assume that her father had felt he was in a similar position--no choice but to do what seemed wrong. Either way, she was finding it harder and harder to look at things in the black and white ways she’d been taught. Those blasted colors kept working their way into things.

 Lacking furniture, Vivenna arranged her dress and knelt on the wooden floor, hands in her lap. Denth and Tonk Fah just sat, sat back against the wall, as if they were just as comfortable sitting on hardwood as they were when lounging in plush chairs.

 “All right, princess,” Denth said, folding a paper out of his pocket. “We’ve got some plans for you to listen to. Most of what we were working on before old Lemks took sick is still in place.”

 “All right.”

 “First,” Denth said, “we can get you a meeting with some of the city’s rebellious elements.”

 “They exist?” Vivenna asked.

 “Sure,” Denth said, lowering the paper. “They do in every city--probably even up in your villages. Somebody’s always got something to gripe about.”

 “And in a big city like this, they tend to gather,” Tonk Fah said, laying back, resting his head against the floor and closing his eyes. He yawned. “They make trouble, that sort of thing.”

 “And. . .do we want to associate with people like that?” Vivenna asked.

 Denth shrugged. “We have to start somewhere. It’s pretty standard procedure.”

 “The other things are a bit more fun,” Tonk Fah said.

 “And they are?” Vivenna asked.

 “Raid the Lifeless storage warehouse, for one,” Denth said, smiling. “We won’t be able to kill the things--not without drawing the rest of them down on us. But, there are things we can do to muck up the way the creatures work.”

 “That sounds a little dangerous,” Vivenna said.

 Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, who opened his eyes. They shared a smile.

 “What?” Vivenna asked.

 “Hazard pay,” Tonk Fah said. “We may not have stolen your money, but we have nothing against overcharging you for extremely dangerous stunts!”

 Great, Vivenna thought.

 “Beyond that,” Denth added, “Lemks wanted us to do something to undermine the food supply situation in the city. It’s a good idea, I suppose. Lifeless don’t need to eat--they’re sustained by feeding off the BioChroma they were given to Awaken them. However, the humans who form the support structure of the army--they need to eat. Disrupt trade in the right way, and perhaps the people here will begin to worry if they can afford to mount a long-term war.”

 “That sounds a little more reasonable,” Vivenna said. “What did you come up with?”

 “We raid merchant caravans,” Denth said. “Hit them at the right time, try and burn things up, cost them a bunch. We make it look like rebellious elements in the city were behind it. That ought to confuse people in T’Telir a bit, and maybe make it more difficult for the priests to go to war.”

 “Priests run a lot of the trade in the city,” Tonk Fah added. “They have all the money, so they tend to own the supplies. Burn away a lot of the things they intended to use for warfare supplies, and they’ll be more hesitant to attack. It’ll buy your people more time.”

 Vivenna swallowed. “Your plans are a bit more. . .violent than I had anticipated.”

 The mercenaries shared a look.

 “You see,” Denth said. “This is where we get our bad reputation. People hire us to do difficult things--like undermine a country’s ability to wage war--then complain that we’re too violent.”

 “Very unfair,” Tonk Fah agreed.

 “Perhaps she’d rather we buy puppies for all of her enemies, then send them with nice apologetic notes, asking them to stop being so mean.”

 “And then,” Tonk Fah said, “when they don’t stop, we could kill the puppies!”

 “All right,” Vivenna said. “You don’t need to be like that. I understand that we’ll have to us a firm hand, but. . . .really. We don’t even know if the war will happen yet.”

 “Princess,” Denth said, sounding more serious. “These people want to attack your homeland. They see your family as the greatest existing threat to their power --and they’re going to make certain that nobody of the Royal blood lives to challenge them.”

 “They get a child by your sister to be the next God King,” Tonk Fah said, “then they kill every other person of Royal blood. They never have to worry about you again.”

 Denth nodded. “Your father assumed that there would be a war the moment he sent your sister to the Court. The Hallandren have everything to lose by not attacking you. And, from what Lemks implied, your people are in a bad position to win this fight. They’re going to need every bit of help you can give them. That means doing everything we can--scaring the priests, breaking their supply reserves, weakening their armies--to help out.”

 “We can’t stop the war,” Tonk Fah added. “We can just make the fight a little more fair.”

 Vivenna took a deep breath, then nodded. “All right, then, we’ll--”

 At that moment, the door to the building flew open, slamming against the other side of the wall. Vivenna looked up, frowning at the figure who stood in there--a tall, bulky man with unusually large muscles and flat features. It took her a moment to register the other oddity about him.

 His skin was grey. His eyes as well. There was no color to him at all, and her Heightenings told her that he didn’t have a single Breath. A Lifeless soldier.

 Vivenna scrambled to her feet, barely keeping in a cry of distress. She backed away from the large soldier. It just stood there, immobile, not even breathing. Its eyes tracked her, however--they didn’t just stare ahead, like those of a dead man.

 For some reason, she found that the most unnerving of all.

 “Denth!” Vivenna said. “What are you doing? Attack!”

 The mercenaries remained where they were, lounging on the floor. Tonk Fah barely cracked an eye open.

 “Ah well,” Denth said, resting back. “Looks like we’ve been discovered.”

 “Pity,” Tonk Fah said. “This was looking like it would be a fun job.”

 “Nothing but execution for us now,” Denth said.

 “Attack!” Vivenna cried. “You’re my bodyguards, you’re. . . .” She trailed off, noticing as the two men began to chuckle.

 Oh, Colors, not again, she thought. “What?” she said. “Some kind of joke? Did you paint that man grey? What’s going on?”

 “Move it, you rock on legs,” a voice said from behind the Lifeless. The creature stumbled forward, obviously shoved from behind. It walked into the room, carrying a couple of canvas bags over its shoulders. As it entered, it revealed a shorter woman standing behind. Thick through the thighs and through the bust, but small of waist, she had light brown hair that came down to her shoulders. She stood with hands on hips, looking somewhat upset.

 “Denth,” she snapped, “he’s here. In the city.”

 “Good,” Denth said, lounging back. “I was hoping to run into him. I owe that man a sword through the gut.”

 The woman snorted. “He killed Arsteel. What makes you think you can beat him?”

 “I’ve always been the better swordsman,” Denth said calmly.

 “Arsteel was good too. Now he’s dead. Who’s the woman?”

 “New employer.”

 “Hope she lives longer than the last one,” the woman grumbled. “Clod, put those down and go get the other bag.”

 The Lifeless responded, setting down his bags then making his way back out, passing the short woman. Vivenna watched quietly, by now having figured out that the woman must be Jewels, the third member of Denth’s team.

 But, what was she doing with a creature like that?
 “What’s wrong with you?” Jewels said, walking into the room, glancing at Vivenna. “Some Awakener come by and steal your colors?”

 Vivenna paused. “What?”

 “She means,” Denth said, “why do you look so surprised?”

 “That, and her hair is white,” Jewels said, walking over to the canvas bags.

 Vivenna flushed, realizing that her shock had gotten the better of her. She returned her hair to its proper dark color, glancing out the door. The Lifeless was returning, carrying another bag.

 “Where did that creature come from?” Vivenna asked.

 “What?” Jewels asked. “Clod? Made him from a dead body, obviously. Or, someone did. I didn’t do it myself--I just paid money for someone else to.”

 “Too much money,” Tonk Fah added.

 The muscular creature clomped back into the room. He wasn’t unnaturally tall--not like a Returned. He could have been a normal, if well muscled, man. Only the coloring of his skin, mixed with the face void of emotion, was different.

 “She bought him?” Vivenna asked. “When? Just now?”

 “Nah,” Tonk Fah said, “we’ve had Clod for months.”

 “It’s useful to have a Lifeless around,” Denth said. “They can do things that no regular person could manage.”

 “And you didn’t tell me about this?” Vivenna asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice. First she’d had to deal with the city and all of its colors and people. Then she was given a batch of unwanted Breath. Now she was confronted by the most unholy of abominations, a creature unnaturally returned to life, fed on the Breath of some unfortunate soul who had been extorted.

 “It didn’t come up,” Denth said, shrugging. “They’re pretty common in T’Telir, princess.”

 “We were just talking about defeating these things,” Vivenna said. “Not embracing them!”

 “We talked about defeating some of them,” Denth said, looking a bit confused. “Princess, Lifeless are like swords. They’re tools. We can’t destroy all of them in the city, nor would we want to. Just the ones being used by your enemies.”

 Vivenna slid down, sitting on the wooden floor. The Lifeless set down its final bag, then Jewels pointed toward the corner. It walked over and stood there, patiently waiting for further orders.

 “Here,” Jewels said to the other two, unzipping the final bag. “You wanted these.” She turned it on its side, exposing glittering metal shining within.

 Denth smiled, rising. He kicked Tonk Fah back awake--the large man had an uncanny ability to fall asleep at a moment’s notice--and walked over to the bag, inspecting its contents. He pulled out several swords, shiny and new-looking, their blades lacking chips or scratches. He smiled, testing the long, thin blades with wide sweeps. Tonk Fah wandered over, pulling out several other weapons. Wicked-looking daggers, some shorter swords, and then some leather jerkins.

 Vivenna sat, back against the wall, using her breathing to calm herself. She tried not to feel threatened by the Lifeless in the corner. How could they just go about, ignoring it like that? There was nothing more devilish and terrible than a Lifeless. It was so unnatural that it made her itch and squirm.

 Eventually, Denth noticed her. He said a few words to Tonk Fah--telling him to oil the blades--then walked over. He sat down in front of her, leaning back with hands against the floor behind him, watching her face.

 “That Lifeless is going to be a problem, princess?” he finally asked.

 “Yes,” she said curtly.

 “Then we’ll need to work it out,” he said, meeting her eyes. “My team can’t function if you try to tie our hands. Jewels has invested a lot of effort into learning the proper Commands to use a Lifeless, not to mention learning to maintain the thing.”

 “We don’t need her.”

 “Yes,” Denth said. “Yes we do. Princess, you’ve brought a lot of biases into this city. It’s not my place to tell you what to do with them. I’m just your employee. A mercenary. A man for hire. But, I’ll just suggest that you’re letting what you think you know guide you, rather than what happens to be reality.”

 “It’s not what I ‘think I know’ Denth,” Vivenna said. “It’s what I believe. A person’s body shouldn’t be abused so, by making it come back to life and serve you.”

 “Why not?” he asked. “Your own theology says a soul leaves when the body dies. So, the corpse is just dirt, recycled. Why not use it?”

 “It’s wrong,” Vivenna said. “In the very least, it’s not respectful.”

 “The family of the corpse was well paid for the body.”

 “Doesn’t matter,” Vivenna said.

 Denth leaned forward. “Well, fine then. But if you order Jewels away, you order us all away. You get your money back; we’ll go grab those soldiers of yours before they go back to Idris, and you can use them as your muscle instead. I’m not letting you slice off members of my team at your whims.”

 “I thought you were my employee,” Vivenna snapped.

 “I am,” Denth said. “But I can quit whenever I want.”

 She sat quietly, stomach unsettled.

 “Your father was willing to use means that he didn’t agree with,” Denth said. “Judge him if you must, but tell me this. If using a Lifeless saves your kingdom, who are you to ignore the opportunity?”

 “Why do you care so much?” Vivenna asked. “Why argue so hard; why hold to a task given you by a now dead employer?”

 Denth shrugged. “I just don’t like to leave things unfinished. Like our discussion--you still haven’t made a decision.”

 Vivenna looked away.

 “Look at it this way, Princess,” he said. “You can work with us--which will give you chances to explain your views, maybe change our minds on things like Lifeless and BioChroma. Or, you can send us away and lose the opportunity. But, if you reject us away because of our sins, aren’t you acting ostentatious? Better than us? Don’t the Five Visions say something about that?”

 Vivenna frowned. How does he know so much about Austrism? “I’ll think about it,” she said. “Why did Jewels bring all those swords?”

 “We’ll need weapons,” Denth said. “You know, has to do with that violence thing we mentioned earlier.”

 “But, you don’t have any already?”

 Denth shrugged. “People don’t carry weapons around very much in T’Telir. So, neither did Tonks and I. It’s best not to stand out, sometimes. Your people have some interesting wisdom in that area.”

 “But now. . . .”

 “Now we don’t really have a choice,” he said. “If we keep moving on with Lemks’ plans, things are going to get dangerous.” He eyed her. “Which reminds me. I have something else for you to think about.”

 “What?”

 “Those Breaths you hold,” Denth said. “They’re a tool. Just like the Lifeless. Now, I know you don’t agree with how they were obtained. But, the fact is, you have them. If a dozen slaves die to forge a sword, does it do any good to melt down the sword and refuse to use it? Or, is it better to use that sword and try to stop the men who did such evil in the first place?”

 “What are you saying?” Vivenna said, feeling that she probably already knew.

 “You should learn to use the Breaths,” Denth said. “Practice with them a bit. In the troubles coming up, Tonks and I could sure use an Awakener backing us up.”

 Vivenna closed her eyes. Did he have to hit her with that now, right after twisting around her concerns about the Lifeless? She had expected troubles in coming to T’Telir. She had expected uncertainties and obstacles. She just hadn’t expected so many difficult decisions.

 And she hadn’t expected them to endanger her soul.

 “I’m not going to become an Awakener, Denth,” Vivenna said quietly. “I might turn a blind eye toward that Lifeless, for now. But I will not Awaken. I’m guarding these Breaths in the honor of those from whom they were stolen. I expect to take them to my death, so that nobody else can benefit from the practice of harvesting them. No matter what you say, if you buy that sword forged by overworked slaves, then you’ll just encourage the merchants to do the same thing again and again.”

 Denth fell silent. Then, he nodded, standing. “You’re the boss, princess. And it’s your kingdom we’re working to help. If we fail, the only thing I lose is an employer. That’s happened often enough to me.”

 “Denth,” Jewels said, approaching. She barely gave Vivenna a glance. “I don’t like this, Denth. I don’t like the fact that he got here first. And, it looks like he found some more Breath somewhere. Reports say he looked to have reached at least the Fourth Heightening. Maybe the Fifth.”

 “How do you know it’s even him?” Denth asked.

 Jewels snorted. “Word’s all over the city, Denth. People being found slaughtered in alleyways, the wounds corrupt and black. There’s talk of a new, powerful Awakener roaming through the streets. One carrying a black-handled sword in a silver sheath. It’s Tax, all right. Goes by a different name now, though.”

 Denth nodded. “Vasher. He’s used it for a while. It’s a joke on his part.”

 Vivenna frowned. Black handled sword. Silver sheath. “Who are we talking about?”

 Jewels shot her an annoyed look, but Denth just shrugged. “Old. . .friend of ours.”

 “He’s bad trouble,” Tonk Fah said, walking up. “Tends to leave a lot of bodies in his wake. Has strange motivations--doesn’t think like other people.”

 “He’s interested in the war for some reason, Denth,” Jewels said.

 “Let him be interested,” Denth snapped. “That will just bring him across my path all the more quickly.” He turned away, waving a hand indifferently and walking back toward the pile of swords that Tonk Fah had oiled. Vivenna watched him go, noting the frustration in his step, the curtness of his motions.

 “What is wrong with him?” she asked quietly of Tonk Fah.

 “Vasher,” Tonk Fah said. “Killed a good friend of ours over in Yarn Dred a couple months back. Denth used to have four people in his team.”

 “It shouldn’t have happened,” Jewels said. “Arsteel was a brilliant duelist--almost as good as Denth himself. Vasher’s never been able to beat either of them. But, Arsteel died with a dueling blade through the chest.”

 “He used that. . .sword of his,” Tonk Fah grumbled.

 “There was no blackness around the wound,” Jewels said, frowning.

 “Then he cut the blackness out with another weapon,” Tonk Fah said, watching Denth belt a sword to his waist. “There’s no way Vasher beat Arsteel in a fair duel. No way.”

 “This Vasher,” Vivenna found herself saying. “I saw him.”

 Jewels and Tonk Fah turned sharply, looking at her.

 “He was at the court yesterday,” she said. “Tall man, carrying a sword when nobody else did. A sword with a black hilt and a silver sheath. He looked. . .ragged. Hair unkempt, beard scraggly, clothing ripped in places. Only a rope for a belt. He was watching me, from behind. When I turned, he just met my eyes, staring at me. He looked. . .dangerous.”

 Tonk Fah cursed quietly.

 “That’s him,” Jewels said. “Denth!” she snapped, catching the mercenary leader’s attention.

 “What?” Denth asked.

 Jewels gestured at Vivenna. “He’s a step ahead of us. Been tailing your princess here. She saw him watching her at the court.”

 “Colors!” Denth swore, snapping a dueling blade into the sheath at his waist. “Colors, colors, Colors!”

 “What?” Vivenna asked, shivering slightly. “Maybe it was just a coincidence. Maybe he was there to watch the court, like I was.”

 Denth shook his head. “There are no coincidences where that man is concerned, princess. If he was watching you, then you can bet on the Colors that he knows exactly who you are and where you came from.” He paused, meeting her eyes. “And he’s probably planning to kill you.”

 Vivenna fell silent.

 Tonk Fah laid a hand on her shoulder. “Ah, don’t worry, princess. He wants to kill us too. So, at least you’re in pleasant company.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty

 For the first time in her several weeks at the palace, Siri stood before the God King’s door and felt neither worried nor tired.

 Bluefingers waited at her side--though, oddly, he wasn’t scribbling on his pad. He was watching her silently, expression unreadable.

 Siri almost smiled to herself. Gone were the days when she’d had to lie on the uncomfortable floor, awkwardly trying to kneel while her back complained. Gone were the days when she had to fall asleep on the marble, her discarded dress her only comfort. Ever since she’d grown daring enough to climb into the bed the previous week, she’d slept comfortable and warm each night. And not once had she been touched by the God King.

 It was actually turning out to be quite a good arrangement. The priests--apparently satisfied that she was doing her wifely duty--now left her alone. She didn’t have to be naked in front of anyone, and she was slowly beginning to learn how things worked in the palace. She was growing accustomed to ordering entertainment when she needed something to do. She’d even gone to a few more sessions of the court, though she hadn’t interacted with the Returned very much.

 “Vessel,” Bluefingers said quietly.

 She turned toward him, raising an eyebrow.

 He shuffled uncomfortably. “You. . .have found a way to make the king respond to your advances, then?”

 “That got out, did it?” she asked, looking back at the door. Inside, her smile deepened.

 “Indeed it did, Vessel,” Bluefingers said, tapping his ledger from beneath with his fingers. “Though, only those in the palace know about any of this, of course. Even then, one must be fairly important to palace proceedings to get the information.”

 Good, Siri thought. She glanced to the side.

 Bluefingers did not look pleased.

 “What?” she asked. “I’m out of danger. I’ve managed to perform my duties as Vessel. The priests can stop worrying about an heir.” At least, for a few months. They’ll get suspicious eventually, I guess, but for now I’m safe.

 “Vessel,” Bluefingers said with a harsh whisper. “Doing your duty as the Vessel was the danger!”

 She frowned, looking at Bluefingers as the little scribe tapped his board, glancing from side to side. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods. . . .” he whispered to himself.

 “What?” she asked.

 “I shouldn’t say.”

 Siri cocked her head. “Then what is the point of bringing it up in the first place! Honestly, Bluefingers, you’re getting a little frustrating. Leave me too confused, and I might just start asking questions--”

 “No!” Bluefingers said sharply, then immediately glanced behind him, cringing slightly. “Vessel, you must not speak to others of my fears. They’re silly, really, nothing to bother anyone else with. Just. . . .”

 “What?” she asked.

 “You must not bear him a child,” Bluefingers said. “That is the danger, both to yourself and to God King himself. This all. . .everything here in the palace. . .it is not what it appears to be.”

 “That’s what everyone says,” she snapped. “If it’s not what it seems, then tell me what it is.”

 “There is no need,” Bluefingers said. “And I will not speak of this again. After tonight, you will lead yourself to the bed chambers--you obviously have the pattern down well enough.”

 “You have to tell me something!” Siri said.

 “Vessel,” Bluefingers said, leaning in. “I advise you to please keep your voice down. You don’t know how many factions shift and move inside the palace. I am part of a large number of them, and a stray word on your part could. . .no, would. . .mean my death. Do you understand that. Can you understand that?”

 She paused.

 “I should not bother putting my life in danger because of you,” he said. “But. . .there are things about this arrangement with which I do not agree. And so, I give my warning. Avoid giving the God King a child. If you want more than that, read your histories. Honestly, I would think that you’d have come to this all a little more prepared.”

 And with that, the little man left.

 Siri stood for a long moment, then sighed and pushed open the door to the God King’s chamber. Inside, she went through her now-familiar ritual. She closed the door, eyed the God King--who watched her, as always--and pulled off her dress, leaving her shift on. Then, she went to the bed and sat down, waiting a few minutes. Once she thought that the priests wouldn’t be suspicious of how fast it happened, she climbed up on her knees and did her bouncing, moaning act. She varied it sometimes, doing several different rhythms, getting creative.

 Once she was done, she snuggled down in the blankets and lay back in the pillows to think.

 Could Bluefingers have been any more obscure? she thought with frustration. Perhaps Vivenna would have known how to read him. Indeed, what little Siri knew of political intrigue told her that people preferred to be subtle--obscure, even--to protect themselves from implication. Bluefingers obviously wanted to tell her just enough to protect her without getting himself into danger.

 It was annoying, but she couldn’t really blame him. What did he owe her? He’d probably already endangered himself far more than he really should have, and for that she should be thankful.

 Read your histories. . . .

 It seemed an odd suggestion. If whatever secrets he protected were that visible, then why would they be dangerous?

 Still, as she thought, she did find herself feeling grateful for Bluefingers. Without him, she probably wouldn’t have felt the danger enough to devise her illusion of sleeping with the God King. She might have done something silly and rebellious, then gotten herself into more trouble. In a way, he was the only friend she had in the city--a person like herself, a person drawn in from another country. A country that was overshadowed by beautiful, bold Hallandren. A man who. . . .

 She trailed off she felt something odd. She opened her eyes.

 Someone loomed over her in the darkness.

 Despite herself, Siri screamed in surprise. The God King jumped back, stumbling slightly. She wasn’t sure why he’d been leaning over her, watching her like that. Heart thumping, she shuffled back on the bed, pulling the covers up over her chest--though, of course, he had seen her unclothed so often that it was a redundant gesture.

 The God King stood, uncertain, in his dark black clothing. She’d never asked her servants why he wore it. It seemed that he would prefer white, which he could affect with his BioChroma so dramatically.

 Siri sat for a few moments, blankets clutched before her, before forcing herself to relax. Stop being so silly, she told herself, regarding the God King. He’s never even so much as threatened you.

 “It’s all right,” she said softly. “You just startled me.”

 He paused, glancing at her. And--with a jolt of surprise--she realized that was the first time she’d addressed him since her outburst the week before, demanding that he just get on with things.

 He stood for a time. When he was standing, she could see even better how. . .heroic he looked. Tall, broad shouldered, like a statue, not really a man. Human, but of more dramatic proportions.

 Carefully, showing more uncertainty than she’d ever expected from a man who had the title of God King, he moved back to the bed. He sat down on its side.

 Then, he reached to his shirt, pulling it up.

 Oh, Austre, she thought with sudden shock. Oh, God, Lord of Colors! This is it! He’s finally coming for me!

 She couldn’t fight off the trembles, and her hands grew tense again. She’d convinced herself that she was safe, comfortable. She shouldn’t have to go through this. Not again!

 I can’t do it! I can’t! I--

 The God King pulled something out from underneath his shirt, then let the garment drape back down. Siri paused, breath coming in gasps, slowly realizing that he was making no further moves toward her.

 She calmed herself, forcing the color back into her hair. The God King laid the object on the bed, and the firelight revealed it to be. . .a book. A thick tome. Siri’s mind was immediately drawn to the histories Bluefingers had mentioned, but she immediately discarded the connection. This book, from the title on the spine, was a book of stories, such as those told to children.

 The God King let his fingers rest on it. Then, he delicately opened to the first page. The white parchment bent in the force of his BioChroma, shooting out prismatic colors in a wave away from him. Yet, this didn’t distort the text, and Siri carefully inched forward, looking at the words on the page.

 She looked up at the God King. His face seemed open, less controlled than usual. He nodded down at the page, then pointed at the first word.

 “You want me to read this?” Siri asked in a quiet whisper, mindful of the priests who might still be listening.

 The God King nodded.

 “It says ‘Stories for Children,’” Siri said, confused.

 He turned the book around, looking at it himself. He rubbed his chin slowly.

 What’s going on? she thought. It didn’t seem like he was going to bed her. Did he, instead, expect her to read a story to him? She couldn’t imagine him asking for something that childish.

 She looked up at him again. He was still studying the page. Reading it, perhaps?

 He turned the page around again, pointing at the first word. He nodded toward it.

 “Stories?” Siri asked.

 He pointed at the word. She looked closely, trying to discern some hidden meaning or mysterious text. She sighed, looking up at him. “Why don’t you just tell me?”

 He paused, cocking his head. Then he opened his mouth. And, by the waning light of the hearth’s fire, Siri saw something very disturbing.

 The God King of Hallandren had no tongue.

 There was a scar. She could see it if she squinted closely. Something had happened to him, some terrible accident had ripped it free. Or. . .had it been taken purposefully? That seemed implausible. Why would anyone take out the tongue of the king himself?

 The answer came to her almost immediately.

 BioChromatic Breath, she realized, thinking back a half-remembered lesson from her childhood. To Awaken objects, a person must give a Command. Words spoken to order the object about.

 Words spoken in a crisp, clear voice. No slurring or mumbling allowed, or the Breath will not function.

 The God King looked away, suddenly, seeming ashamed. He picked up the book, holding it to his chest, and moved to stand.

 “No, please,” Siri said, edging forward. She reached her hand forward and touched his arm.

 The God King paused. So did she. She immediately pulled her hand back. “I didn’t mean to look so disgusted,” Siri said in her whispered voice. “That wasn’t because of. . .your mouth. It was because I was thinking about why it must have been done to you.”

 The God King paused, then slowly seated himself again. He held himself back far enough that they were not touching, and she did not reach for him again. However, he did carefully--almost reverently--put his book back down on the bed. He opened to the first page again, then looked at her, his eyes pleading.

 “You can’t read, can you?” Siri asked.

 He shook his head.

 “That’s the secret,” she whispered, feeling awed. “The thing that scares Bluefingers so much. You’re not king, you’re a puppet. A figurehead. You’re paraded about by your priests, given a BioChromatic aura so strong that it makes people fall to their knees in wonder. Yet, they took your tongue so that you couldn’t ever use it, and they never taught you to read, lest you learn too much or manage to communicate with others somehow!”

 He sat quietly, looking away.

 “All so that they could control you.” No wonder Bluefingers is so scared. If they would do that to their own God. . .then the rest of us are nothing to them.

 It made sense, now, why they had been so adamant about her not talking to, or even kissing, the king. It made sense why they would dislike her so much. They were worried about someone spending time alone with the God King. Someone who might discover the truth.

 “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

 He shook his head, then met her eyes. There was a strength in them she wouldn’t have expected of a man who had been sheltered and isolated as he must have been. Finally, he looked down, pointing back at the words on the page. The first word. The first letter, actually.
 “That is the letter ‘shash’” Siri said, smiling. “I can teach you them all, if you wish.”

 The priests, apparently, had been right to be worried about her.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-one

 Vasher stood atop the palace of the God King, watching the sun set beneath the western rainforest. The sunset was vibrant against the clouds, colors flaring for the moment, beautiful reds and oranges painting the trees. Then, the colors died, fading darker and darker.

 Some said that before a man died, his BioChromatic aura flared with sudden brightness. Like a heart giving its last beat. Like the final surge of a wave before the tide retreats. Vasher had seen it happen, but only on occasion. Most men died with far less fanfare.

 Dramatic, Nightblood noted.

 The sunset? Vasher asked.

 Yes.

 You can’t see it, he said to the sword.

 But I can feel you seeing it. Crimson. Like blood in the air.

 Vasher didn’t respond. The sword couldn’t see. But, with its powerful, twisted BioChroma, it could sense life and people. It had been created to protect such things. It was strange, how easily and quickly that protection had become destruction.

 Sometimes, Vasher wondered if the two weren’t really the same thing. Protect a flower. Destroy the pests who wanted to feed on it. Protect a building. Destroy the plants that could have grown in the soil.

 Protect a man. Live with the destruction he creates.

 It was dark out. Yet, Vasher had enough Breath to sense the life around him--and not just the human life. He could just faintly feel the grass growing below, and knew how far away it was. With more Breath, he might even have been able to sense the lichen growing on the stones of the palace. As it was, he’d have to deal with starlight.

 He knelt down, laying one hand on his trouser leg and his other hand on the stone of the palace.

 “Strengthen me,” he Commanded, Breathing. His trouser legs stiffened, and a patch of color bled from the black stone beside his other hand. Black was a color. He’d never considered that before he’d become an Awakener.

 Tassels hanging at his cuffs stiffened, wrapping around his ankle. Kneeling as he was, they could twist around the bottoms of his. After that, he placed a hand on the shoulder of his shirt, touching another patch of marble.

 “Upon call of necessity, become my fingers and grip what I must,” he Commanded. The shirt wiggled a bit, drawing forth a frightening amount of his Breath. A group of tassels curled up around his hand. Five of them. Like fingers.

 It was a difficult Command, still relatively unknown. It required far more Breath to Awaken than he would have liked--his Breath remaining barely allowed him the First Heightening. Yet, the finger tassels had proven very useful, when used correctly, and he was loath to engage in the night’s activities without them.

 He stood up straight, noting the scar of gray marble on the otherwise perfectly black surface of the palace. He smiled to think of the indignation the priests would feel when they discovered it.

 He tested the strength in his legs. A simple strengthening Awakening wasn’t the most efficient use of Breath, but it too had proven very useful in the past. He gripped Nightblood, then took a careful step off the side of the palace. He fell some ten feet--the palace was constructed from massive, stone blocks in a steep pyramidal shape. He landed hard on the top of the next block, but his Awakened clothing absorbed some of the shock, acting like a second set of bones. He stood up, nodding to himself, then took the other pyramid steps.

 Eventually, he landed down on the soft grass on the north side of the palace, close to the wall that surrounded the entire plateau. He crouched, watching quietly.

 Sneaking, Vasher? Nightblood said. You’re terrible at sneaking.

 Vasher didn’t respond.

 You should just attack, Nightblood said. You’re good at that.

 You just want to prove how strong you are, Vasher thought.

 Well, yes, the sword replied. But you do have to admit that you’re pretty bad at sneaking.

 Vasher ignored the sword. With so much of his Breath tied up in Awakenings, he wouldn’t draw as much attention to himself. Still, a lone man in ragged clothing carrying a sword across the grounds would be more than a little suspicious. So, he surveyed.

 The Court of Gods at night was still a busy place. He could see that most of the palaces burned lanterns, their Gods still seeking entertainment. Vasher had picked a night where they didn’t have one of their more grand celebrations out in the courtyard, but there were still small groups of priests, minstrels, or servants moving between palaces.

 How sure are you on this information of yours? Nightblood said. Because, honestly, I don’t trust priests.

 He isn’t a priest, Vasher thought, still watching the grounds. Eventually, he moved, creeping through the dark starlight shadow of the wall’s overhang, counting off palaces. His contact had warned him to stay away from the palaces of an influential Gods like Blushweaver and Stillmark. But, he had also said that the palace of a lesser God--like Giftbeacon or Peaceyearning--wouldn’t work for Vasher’s purpose.

 So, this night’s information related to the Goddess Mercystar, a Returned known for her involvement in politics, yet who wasn’t quite so influential. Fortunately, her palace this night looked relatively dark already. Mercystar was one of the more subdued Returned in the Court.

 Of course, its lack of bright illumination didn’t mean it wasn’t guarded. Hallandren Returned had servants to burn, and could afford to keep a few watching the entrances to their buildings. Sure enough, Vasher found two men guarding the door he wanted. They weren’t armed, and they wore the extravagant costumes of their station, colored yellow and gold after the pattern of their mistress.

 The men weren’t armed. Who would attack the home of a Returned? They were simply there to keep anyone from wandering in an bothering their lady while she slept. They stood by their torches, alert and at attentive, but more for the sake of presentation than anything else.

 Vasher stuffed Nightblood beneath his cloak, then walked out of the darkness, looking from side to side anxiously, mumbling to himself.

 Oh, please, Nightblood said flatly. The old crazy routine? You’re more clever than that.

 This is the Court of Gods, Vasher thought. Nothing attracts the unbalanced more than the prospect of meeting deities.

 Indeed, the two guards looked up when they saw him approaching, but they didn’t seem surprised. They had probably dealt with marginally insane people every day of their professional careers. Vasher had seen the types who ended up in the lines for Returned petitions. The law said that nobody could be turned away.

 “Here now,” one of the men said as Vasher approached. “How’d you get in here?”

 Vasher stepped up to them, mumbling to himself about talking to the Goddess. The second man put a hand on Vasher’s shoulder. “Come on, friend. Let’s get you back to the gates, see if there’s a shelter that’s still taking people for the night.”

 Vasher paused. Kindness. He hadn’t expected that, for some reason. The emotion made him feel a tad guilty for what he had to do next.

 He snapped his arm to the side, twitching his thumb twice to make the finger tassels on his shirt sleeve--much longer than his actual fingers--begin mimicking the motions of his real fingers. He formed a fist. The tassels snapped forward, curling around, wrapping around the first guard’s neck.

 The man choked out a soft gasp of surprise. Before the second guard could react, Vasher brought Nightblood up, ramming the hilt into the guard’s stomach. The man stumbled, and Vasher swept his feet out from beneath him, sending him down to the grass. Vasher’s boot followed, coming down slowly but firmly on the man’s neck. The man wiggled, but Vasher’s legs bore Awakened strength.

 He stood for a long moment, both men struggling, neither managing to escape their strangulation. A few minutes later, Vasher stepped off the second guard’s neck, then lowered the first guard to the grass, twitching his thumb twice and releasing the finger tassels.

 You didn’t use me much, Nightblood said, sounding hurt. You could have used me. I’m better than a shirt. I’m a sword.

 Vasher ignored the sword, looking up, scanning the darkness to see if the motions had been spotted.

 I really am better than a shirt. I would have killed them. Look, they’re still breathing. Stupid shirt.

 That was the point, Vasher thought. Corpses cause more investigations than men knocked out.

 I could knock people out, Nightblood said immediately.

 Vasher shook his head, ducking into the building. Returned palaces were generally just connections of open rooms; many didn’t even have doors that could close. This palace was of that type--it held only colorful sheets on the doorways. The weather was so temperate in Hallandren that the building could be open to the air at all times.

 He didn’t go through the central rooms. Instead, he stayed in the servant hallway--the one that ran around the outside perimeter of the square building. If his informant had been truthful, then what he wanted could be found on the northeast side of the building. As he walked, he unraveled the rope from his waist.

 Belts are stupid, Nightblood said. They--

 At that moment, a group of four servants rounded the corner directly ahead of Vasher. Vasher looked up, shocked but not really surprised. This was, after all, the servant hallway.

 The servants stared at him, motionless. Vasher snapped the rope forward, Commanding at the same time. “Hold things,” he said, giving up the rest of his Breath.

 The rope rapped around the arm of one of the servants, though Vasher had been aiming for the neck. He cursed, yanking the person forward. The man cried out as Vasher knocked knocking him against the side of the corner. The others moved to bolt.

 Vasher whipped out Nightblood with his other hand.

 Yes! the sword thought.

 Vasher, however, didn’t draw the sword. He simply tossed it forward, toward the three men. The blade skidded against the floor, then came to rest before them.

 One of the group paused, looking down at the sword, transfixed. He reached out tentatively, eyes growing awed.

 The other two took off running, yelling about an intruder.

 Blast! Vasher thought. He yanked the rope again, knocking the entangled servant off of his feet again. Then, Vasher dashed forward, wrapping the rope around the man’s hands and body. To his side, the remaining servant ignored both Vasher and his friend. This man picked up Nightblood, eyes alight. He undid the snap on the hilt, moving to pull the sword free.

 He got barely a thin sliver of blade free before dark, water-like smoke began to drip out, wrapping around the man’s arm, drawing the color from his skin.

 Vasher kicked out with an Awakened leg, knocking the man down, forcing him to drop Nightblood. He left the first man squirming, tied up in the rope, then grabbed the one who had held the sword and rammed his head against the wall.

 The other two servants still cried for help in the distance.

 Breathing hard, Vasher grabbed Nightblood, closed the sheath, and did up the snap. Then, he reached over, touching the rope that tied up the still-awake, yet dazed, servant.

 “Your Breath to mine,” he said, recovering the Breath from the rope, leaving the man still bound.

 You didn’t let me kill him, Nightblood said, annoyed.

 No, Vasher said. Corpses, remember?

 And. . .two ran away from me. That’s not right.

 You cannot tempt the hearts of men who are pure, Nightblood, Vasher thought, standing up straight. No matter how much he explained that concept, it seemed beyond the sword’s ability to comprehend.

 Vasher moved quickly, dashing down the hallway. He only had a little further to go. However, already there were cries and calls for help. He had no desire to fight an army of servants and soldiers. He paused, uncertain, in the unadorned stone hallway. He noticed, idly, that Awakening the rope had inadvertently stolen the color from his boots and cloak--the only pieces of clothing he wore that weren’t Awakened..

 The grey clothing would instantly brand him for what he was. He stood out like a Returned in a crowd of people. But, backing down made him cringe. He gritted his teeth in frustration, punching the wall. This was supposed to have gone a lot more smoothly.

 I told you that you aren’t sneaky, Nightblood said.

 Shut up, Vasher thought, determined not to turn back. He reached into a pouch at his belt, pulling out the object within.

 A dead squirrel.

 Yuck, Nightblood said with a sniffing sound.

 Vasher knelt, putting a hand on the creature.

 “Awaken to my Breath,” he Commanded, “serve my needs, live at my Command and my word. Rope.”

 That last word, Rope, was a security word, a perpetual Command. Vasher could have chosen anything, but he picked the first thing that came to mind. One Breath was leached from his body, going down into the small rodent’s corpse. It began to twitch.

 That was one breath Vasher would never be able to recover. Creating a Lifeless was a permanent event. Even as he watched, the colored breath twisted upon itself, getting sucked into the creature’s body. Then, the squirrel lost all color, bleeding to grey, the Awakening feeding off the body’s own colors to fuel the transformation. The squirrel had been grey in the first place, so the difference was tough to see. That’s why Vasher preferred to use them.

 “Command Rope,” he said to the creature, its grey eyes looking up at him. The security word said, Vasher could imprint it with an order, much like he did when performing a standard Awakening. “Make noise. Bite people. Command Rope.” The last use of the word closed its impressionability, so it could no longer be Commanded.

 The squirrel hopped up to its feet, then scampered down the hallway, heading for the open doorway the fleeing servants had disappeared into. Vasher stood and began to run again, hoping that his distraction would earn him a bit of time. Indeed, a few moments later he heard cries coming from the doorway the squirrel had entered. Clangs and screams followed. Lifeless could be difficult to stop, particularly a fresh one with orders to bite.

 Vasher smiled.

 We could have taken them, Nightblood said.

 Vasher rushed to the place his information had indicated, sounds of anger still sounding behind. The location in the hallway was marked by a splintered board in the wall, ostensibly just normal wear of the building. Vasher crouched, hoping that his informant had not lied. He searched around a bit on the floor, then froze, finding the hidden latch.

 He pulled it open, revealing a trap door in the wooden floor. Returned palaces were only supposed to be one story. He smiled.

 What if this tunnel doesn’t have another way out? Nightblood asked as Vasher dropped into the hole, trusting on his Awakened clothing to absorb the blow of the drop.

 Then you’ll probably get to kill a lot of people, Vasher thought. He didn’t have many worries in that regard, however. His information had been good so far. He suspected that the rest was good as well.

 The priests of the Returned, it appeared, were hiding things from the rest of the kingdom. And from their Gods.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Three

 The man was small, almost skeletal. It dumbfounded Vivenna how he could keep eating like he did.

 Each shellfish he slurped made her cringe for two reasons. Not only did she have trouble believing that anyone would enjoy such slimy, unnatural food, but the mussels were also--apparently--of a very rare and expensive variety.

 And she was paying.

 The afternoon restaurant crowd was large--Denth said that if people were going to pay for a meal, they usually did it at mid-day, when it made more sense to buy food than return home for a meal. The entire concept of restaurants still seemed a little strange to her. Didn’t these men have wives or servants to make them food? Didn’t they feel uncomfortable eating in such an unfamiliar, public place? It was so. . .impersonal.

 Yet, many did--even at this particular restaurant, which was one of the more expensive in the dock area. Denth and Tonk Fah sat on either side of her. And, of course, they helped themselves to the plate of mussels as well. Vivenna wasn’t certain--she’d pointedly not asked--but she thought that the shellfish were raw.

 The thin man across from her slurped another one down. He didn’t seem to be enjoying himself much despite the expensive surroundings and free food. He had a sneer on his lips, and while he didn’t appear nervous, she did notice that he kept an eye on the restaurant entrance.

 “So,” Denth said, setting another empty shell on the table, then wiping his fingers on the tablecloth--a common practice in T’Telir. “Can you help us or not?”

 The little man--he simply called himself Fob--shrugged. “You tell a wild tell, mercenary.”

 “You know me, Fob,” Denth said. “When have I lied to you?”

 “Whenever you’ve been paid to do it,” Fob said with a snort. “I’ve just never been able to catch you squarely.”

 Tonk Fah chuckled, reaching for another mussels. It slipped free of the shell as he brought it to his lips, falling to the table, and Vivenna had to steel herself to keep from gagging.

 “You don’t disagree that war is coming, though,” Denth said.

 “Of course not,” Fob said. “But it’s been coming for decades now. What makes you think that it will finally happen this year?”

 “We’ve discussed this,” Denth said.

 “I just don’t know. . . .” Fob said.

 “Can you afford to ignore the chance that it’s coming?” Denth asked.

 Fob squirmed a bit, then began eating mussels again. To the side, Tonk Fah began stacking the shells, seeing how many he could get balanced on top of one another.

 Vivenna waited quietly, not speaking until Denth said to do so. Her minor part in the meetings didn’t bother her--she was well aware that in many situations, the one who did the talking was not the one in power. She watched, she learned, and she thought.

 Fob was a merchant. A landowner, actually. He cleared forests, then rented the land to workers. However, he often relied on Lifeless to help with his clearing--workers loaned to him via the government. There was only one stipulation upon the lending. Should war come, all of the food produced on his holdings immediately became the property of the Returned, to use in the war effort.

 It was a good deal. The government would probably seize his lands during a war anyway, so he didn’t really lose anything in the deal save for his right to complain.

 He ate another mussel. How does he keep packing them down? she thought with amazement. Fob had managed to slurp away nearly twice as many of the disgusting little creatures as Tonk Fah.

 “That harvest won’t come in, Fob,” Denth said, leaning in. “You will lose quite a bit this year, should we prove right.”

 “But,” Tonk Fah said, adding another shell to his stack, “harvest early, sell your stockpiles, and you stand to get ahead of your competitors.”

 “And what do you gain?” Fob asked. “How do I know those same competitors haven’t hired you to convince me a war is coming?”

 The table fell silent--other diners clattering at their own meals--as Fob continued to eat. Denth finally turned, eyeing Vivenna, and nodded.

 She put up her shawl--not the matronly one she’d brought with her from Idris, but one that Denth had found for her. A silken, gossamer thing that looked more Hallandren. Then, she met Fob’s eyes, and changed her hair to a deep red.

 He froze. “Do that again,” he said.

 She changed it to blonde.

 Fob sat, letting his mussel slip free of its shell. It splatted against the table.

 “The queen?” he asked with shock.

 “No,” Vivenna said. “Her sister. I am the heir to the Idris throne.” It was technically true--now that her father hadn’t sent Vivenna to Idris, she would probably stand to inherit instead of her younger brother. Of course, she might well be disinherited for what she’d done in coming down to Hallandren, but she didn’t know for certain yet.

 “What’s going on here?” Fob asked.

 Denth smiled. “She’s here to organize a resistance against the Returned Gods, and to prepare Idrian interests here in T’Telir for the coming war.”

 “You don’t think that old Royal up in the highlands would send his daughter for nothing?” Tonk Fah said. “War. It’s the only thing that would call for such desperation.”

 “Your sister,” Fob said, eying Vivenna. “They sent the younger one into the court. Why?”

 “The king’s plans are his own, Fob,” Denth said.

 Fob paused again, looking thoughtful. Finally, he flipped the fallen muscle onto the plate of shells and reached for a fresh one. “I knew there was more behind that girl’s arrival than simple chance or mistake.”

 “So you’ll harvest?” Denth asked.

 “I’ll think about it,” Fob said.

 Denth nodded. “Good enough, I guess.”
 He nodded to Vivenna and Tonk Fah, and the three of them left Fob eating his shellfish. Vivenna settled the tab--which was even higher than she’d feared--and then they joined Peprin, Jewels, and Clod the Lifeless waiting outside. The group moved away from the restaurant, pushing through the crowd more easily, if only for the massive Lifeless that walked before them.

 “Where now?” Vivenna asked.

 Denth eyed her. “Not even tired a little?”

 Vivenna didn’t acknowledge her sore feet or drowsiness. “We’re working for the salvation of my people, Denth. A little tiredness is a small price.”

 Denth shot a glance toward Tonk Fah, but the overweight mercenary had split off into the crowd toward a merchant’s stand, Peprin tagging along behind, talking animatedly about something.

 “Jewels,” Denth called up ahead. “To the Raymar place.” She nodded, giving instructions to Clod that Vivenna couldn’t hear. Then, the group turned another direction through the crowd, Jewels and her Lifeless leading the way.

 “It only responds to her?” Vivenna said, frowning.

 Denth shrugged. “It does have basic commands to do what Tonks and I say. Plus, I’ve got a Security word I can give if I need to change its basic Commands.”

 Vivenna frowned. “Security word?”

 Denth eyed her. “This is a rather heretical discussion we’re getting into. You sure you want to continue?”

 Vivenna ignored the amusement in his tone. “I still do not like the idea of that thing being with us, particularly if I don’t have any way to control it.”

 “All Awakening works by way of the Command, princess,” Denth said. “You infuse something with life, then give it an order--or a set of orders. Lifeless are valuable because you can give them Commands after you create them, unlike regular Awakened objects, which you can only Command once. Plus, Lifeless can remember a long list of complicated orders, and are generally good about not misunderstanding them. They retain a bit of their humanity, I guess. Enough to interpret how to best deal with their orders.”

 Vivenna shivered. That made them seem far too sentient for her likes.

 “However, that means pretty much anyone can control a Lifeless,” Denth said. “Not just the person who created them. So, the people who make them generally give the creatures Security words. A word you can say, then imprint the creature with new Commands.”

 “And what’s that thing’s Security word?”

 “I’ll have to ask Jewels if you can have it,” Denth said.

 Vivenna opened her mouth to complain, but then thought better of it. Denth obviously didn’t like interfering with Jewels or her work. Vivenna would simply have to make a point of it later, once they were in a more private location and she could hold their attention.

 Instead, she fell silent, though she did continue to study Clod, up ahead. He was dressed in simple clothing. Grey trousers and grey shirt, with a leather jerkin that had been drained of color. He carried a large sword at his waist. Not a dueling blade--a more brutal, soldier-like weapon. Its leather scabbard also looked to have been drained of color.

 All in grey, Vivenna thought. Is that because it destroys color, or because they want everyone to know exactly what this thing is?

 Market goers certainly made way for it. Despite what Denth said about Lifeless being common in the city, it seemed to Vivenna that many people gave the thing too wide a berth.

 Snakes might be common in the jungle, she thought, but that doesn’t mean that people are excited about seeing them.

 As before, Jewels gave Vivenna very little consideration. Instead, she walked along, chatting quietly with the Lifeless itself, though it never responded. It simply walked, face forward, inhuman in the steady rhythm of its steps.

 “Does she always. . .talk to it like that?” Vivenna asked, shivering.

 “Yeah,” Denth said.

 “That doesn’t seem very healthy.”

 Denth nodded, looking a little troubled, though he said nothing further on the matter. A few moments later, Tonk Fah and Peprin returned. Upon Tonk Fah’s shoulder, Vivenna was displeased to see, there was a small monkey wearing a vest. It chittered a bit, then ran across behind Tonk Fah’s neck, moving to the other shoulder.

 “A new pet?” Vivenna asked. “What happened to that parrot of yours, anyway?”

 Tonk Fah looked ashamed, and Denth just shook his head. “Tonks isn’t very good with pets.”

 “That parrot was boring anyway,” Tonk Fah said. “Monkeys are much more interesting.”

 Peprin nodded enthusiastically. “Vivenna, can I have some money to--”

 “No,” she said sharply.

 “But, Tonk Fah has--”

 “Tonk Fah is none of your concern,” Vivenna said. “You’re not buying a monkey. Besides, I thought you had your own money.”

 “They’re only selling trained ones,” Peprin said sullenly. “Those’re expensive, and I don’t have enough.”

 Thank Austre, Vivenna thought. It wasn’t long before they arrived at the next restaurant, a far less lavish location than the previous one. Jewels, Peprin, and the Lifeless took up places outside, as usual, and Vivenna and the two male mercenaries walked inside.

 The meetings were becoming routine for Vivenna, now. During the last couple of weeks, they’d met with a good dozen people of varying importance or usefulness. Some were underground leaders who Denth thought might be capable of making a ruckus. Others were merchants or workers of various influence, like Fob. All in all, Vivenna was impressed with the variety of ways the mercenaries had come up with to disrupt things in T’Telir--and each and every plan was quiet, behind the scenes.

 Most of the plans did, however, require a display of Vivenna’s Royal Locks. The people with whom they met instantly grasped the importance of a Royal daughter being in the city, and she was generally left wondering just how Lemks had intended to achieve results without such convincing proof.

 Denth led them to a table in the corner, and Vivenna frowned at how dimly lit the restaurant was. It was rather dirty as well. Despite her hunger--the last two restaurants had been seafood--she quickly determined that she would not be eating anything at this establishment either.

 “Why is it that we keep switching restaurants, anyway?” she said, sitting down--but only after brushing off the stool.

 “Harder to spy on us that way,” Denth said. “I keep warning you, princess. This is more dangerous work than it seems. Don’t let the simple meal conversations throw you off. In any other city, we’d be meeting in underground lairs, gambling parlors, or alleyways. Best to keep moving, avoid what predictability we can.”

 They settled down. And, as if they hadn’t just come from their second lunch of the day, Denth and Tonk Fah ordered food. Vivenna sat quietly in her chair, preparing for the next meeting. God’s day was something of a holy day in Hallandren--though, from what she’d seen, the people of the pagan city had no real concept of what a ‘Holy Day’ was supposed to be. Instead of refraining from other work and helping the monks in their fields or caring for the needy, the people simply took the evening off. And, they were more likely to splurge on meals, as if the Gods wanted them to be lavish with their spending.

 And, perhaps they did. From what she’d heard, the Returned were rather wasteful themselves. It made sense, perhaps, for their followers to spend their ‘holy day’ being idle and gluttonous.

 Their contact arrived before the food. He walked in with two bodyguards of his own. He wore nice clothing--which meant bright clothing, in T’Telir--but his beard was long and greasy, and he appeared to be missing several teeth. He pointed, and his bodyguards pulled a second table over next to Vivenna’s, then arranged three chairs at it. The man took a seat, careful to keep his distance from Denth and Tonk Fah.

 “A little paranoid, aren’t we?” Denth said.

 The man raised his hands. “Why not? Cautiousness never hurt a man.”

 “More food for us, then,” Tonk Fah said as the plate arrived. It was covered with bits of. . .something that had been battered and fried. Vivenna didn’t intend to find out what it was. The monkey, however, immediately scrambled down Tonk Fah’s arm and snatched a few pieces.

 “So,” the man said, “you’re the infamous Denth.”

 “I am. I assume you’re Garble?”

 The man nodded.

 One of the city’s less reputable thieving lords, Vivenna thought. They had been waiting weeks to set up this meeting.

 “Good,” Denth said. “We have some. . .interest in making certain supply carts disappear on the way to the city.”

 Vivenna felt a chill. He said it so openly. She glanced about, making certain no other tables were close.

 “Garble owns this restaurant, princess,” Tonk Fah whispered, leaning over to her. “Nobody will be here except those he wants to be. Every second man in this room is probably a bodyguard.”

 Great, she thought, annoyed they hadn’t told her that before they entered. She glanced around, feeling far more jumpy. Now that she knew to look, she noticed that far too high a percentage of the restaurant patrons had the lean, muscled bodies of warriors.

 “Is that so?” Garble asked, bringing Vivenna’s attention back to the conversation. “You want to make things disappear? Caravans of food?”

 “It’s a difficult job we ask,” Denth said grimly. “These aren’t long distance caravans. Most of them will simply becoming into the city from the outlying farms.” He nodded to Vivenna, and she pulled out a small pouch of coins. She handed them to him, and he tossed them to a nearby table.

 One of the bodyguards investigated.

 “For your trouble of setting up the meeting,” Denth said.

 Vivenna watched the money go with a crimp in her stomach. It felt downright wrong to be using royal funds to bribe men like Garble. And, what she had just given away wasn’t even a real bribe--it was simply ‘grease money’ as Denth put it. A few coins given away at the beginning to make the conversation go more smoothly.

 “Now,” Denth said, “the carts we’re talking about--”

 “Wait,” Garble said. “Let’s see the hair first.”

 Vivenna sighed, moving to put up the shawl.

 “No shawl,” Garble said. “No tricks. The men in this room are loyal.”

 Vivenna shot a glance at Denth, and he nodded. So, she shifted colors a couple of times. Garble watched intently, scratching at his beard.

 “Nice,” he finally said. “Nice indeed. Where’d you find her?”

 Denth frowned. “What?”

 “A person with enough Royal blood to imitate one of the princesses.”

 “She’s no imposter,” Denth said as Tonk Fah continued to work on the plate of fried somethings.

 “Come now,” Garble said, smiling with a wide, uneven smile. “You can tell me.”

 “It’s true,” Vivenna said. “Being Royal is about more than just blood. It’s about Breath and about lineage, and out the holy calling of Austre. My children will not have the Royal Locks unless I become queen of Idris. Only potential heirs display hair that can change.”

 “Superstitious nonsense,” Garble said. He leaned forward, ignoring her and focusing on Denth. “I don’t care about your caravans or supply offers, Denth. I want to buy the girl from you. How much?”

 Denth was silent.

 “Word of her is moving about town,” Garble said. “I see what you’re doing. You could move a lot of people, make a lot of noise, with a person who seemed to be of the Royal family. I don’t know where you found her, or how you trained her so well, but I want her.”

 Denth stood up slowly. “We’re leaving,” he said to Vivenna.

 Garble’s bodyguards stood up too. And then, Denth moved. There were flashes--reflections of sunlight, and bodies moving too fast for Vivenna’s shocked mind to follow.

 The motion stopped. Garble remained in his chair. Denth stood poised, his dueling blade sticking through the neck of one of the bodyguards. The man looked surprised, his hand still on his sword, his eyes confused. Vivenna hadn’t even seen Denth draw his weapon.

 The other bodyguard stumbled, blood staining the front of his jerkin. He lurched, then slipped to the ground, bumping Garble’s table in his death throws.

 Lord of Colors. . . . Vivenna thought. So fast!

 “So, you are as good as they say,” Garble said, still looking unconcerned. Around the room, the other men had stood. Some twenty of them. Tonk Fah grabbed another handful of fried things, then nudged Vivenna.

 “We might want to get up,” he whispered.

 Denth pulled his sword free of the second bodyguard’s neck, and the man joined his friend, bleeding and dying on the floor. Denth slammed his sword into its sheath without wiping it, never breaking Garble’s gaze.

 “People speak of you,” Garble said. “Say you appeared out of nowhere a decade or so back. Gathered yourself a team of the best--or the worst, depending on who you talk too. Stole a couple of them from important men. Or important prisons.”

 Denth nodded toward the doorway. Vivenna stood nervously, then let Tonk Fah pull her through the room. She looked at the men, standing with their hands on their swords, watching them go. Yet, nobody attacked.

 “It’s a pity we couldn’t do business,” Garble said, sighing. “I hope you’ll think of me for future dealings.”

 Denth finally turned away, joining Vivenna and Tonk Fah as they left the building. He strode forward, moving out onto the street, Vivenna following quickly, her heart still thumping. Peprin and Jewels hurried to catch up.

 “He’s letting us go?” Vivenna asked, glancing back at the restaurant.

 “He just wanted to see my blade,” Denth said. He still seemed tense. “It happens sometimes.”

 “Barring that, he wanted to steal you,” Tonk Fah added. “Either way, he won. He either got to verify Denth’s skill, or he got you.”

 “But. . .you could have killed him!” Vivenna said.

 Tonk Fah snorted. “And bring down the wrath of half the thieves, assassins, and burglars in the city? No, Garble knew he wasn’t ever in any danger from us.”

 Denth looked back at her. “I’m sorry for wasting your time with him--I thought he’d be more useful.”

 She frowned, noting for the first time the careful mask that Denth kept on his emotions. She’d always thought of him as carefree, like Tonk Fah, but now she saw hints of something else. Control. Control that was, for the first time since they’d met, in danger of cracking.

 “Well, no harm done,” she said.

 “Except for those slobs that Denth poked,” Tonk Fah added, happily feeding another morsel to his monkey.

 “We need to--”

 “Princess?” a voice asked from the crowd.

 Denth and Tonk Fah both spun, hands going to their weapons. Once again, Denth’s sword was out before Vivenna could track. This time, however, he didn’t strike. The man behind them didn’t seem much of a threat. He wore ragged brown clothing, and had a dirty face. He had the look of a farmer, if one who had hit on very unpleasant times.

 “Oh, princess,” the man said, hurrying forward, ignoring the blades. “It is you. I heard rumors, but. . .oh, you’re here!”

 Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, and the larger mercenary reached out, putting a hand in front of the newcomer before he got too close to Vivenna. She would have thought the caution unnecessary, had she just not seen Denth kill two men in an eye blink. It was still only slowly seeping into her mind that people could be that dangerous. If this man had a hidden weapon, and if he had Denth’s speed, he could kill her before she realized what was happening.

 It was a chilling realization. Her only consolation was that she suspected few people were as fast, or as skilled, as Denth seemed to be.

 “Princess,” the man said, falling to his knees.

 “Please,” she said. “Do not put me above others.”

 “Oh,” the man said, looking up. “I’m sorry. It’s been so long! So long since I left Idris. But, I would know no matter how much time passed, princess. People have been saying that you’re in the city.”

 “People?” Vivenna asked. “What people?”

 “The Idrians here in T’Telir,” the man said. “They say. . .you’ve come to take the throne back. To restore us to prosperity. We’ve been oppressed here for so long. . .I thought people were just making up stories. But it’s true! You’re here!”

 Denth glanced at her, then at Garble’s restaurant, which was still close behind them. Then, he nodded to Tonk Fah. “Grab him, search him, and we’ll talk to him somewhere else.”

#

 The ‘somewhere else’ turned out to be a ragged dump of a building in one of the poorer sections of town about a fifteen minute walk from the restaurant.

 Vivenna found the slums of T’Telir to be very interesting, on an intellectual level at least. Even here, there was color. Yet, most of it had lost its brightness. People wore clothing with dyes that had faded. Bright strips of cloth hung from windows, crossed overhangs, and even sat in puddles on the street. Yet, these were dirtied and dark. Like a carnival that had been hit by a mudslide.

 Vivenna stood outside a shack with Jewels, Peprin, and the Idrian, waiting as Denth and Tonk Fah made certain the building wasn’t hiding any unseen threats. She wrapped her arms about herself, feeling an odd sense of melancholy. The colors in the alley-like street felt wrong to her. Brown and faded, they were like dead things. Like a beautiful bird that had fallen motionless to the ground, its shape intact, but the magic somehow gone.

 She glanced at the pile of refuse beside her. How strange it was to see brilliant peeks of color in garbage. Ruined reds, stained yellows, broken greens. In T’Telir, even simple things--like chair legs and storage sacks--were dyed bright colors. How much must the people of the city spend on dyes and inks? If it hadn’t been for the Tears of Edgli, the vibrant flowers that grew only in the T’Telir climate, it probably would have been impossible. Yet, Hallandren had made an entire economy out of growing, harvesting, and producing dyes from the majestic flowers.

 Vivenna wrinkled her nose at the smell of the refuse, and shook her head, moving up wind a bit. Scents seemed more vibrant to her now, much like colors. It wasn’t that her ability to smell was any better, the things that she smelled just seemed more rich. She shivered, glancing away. Even still, weeks after the infusion of Breath, she didn’t feel normal. She could sense the teeming people of the city, could sense Peprin beside her, poking at a bit of garbage with his foot. He could sense Denth and Tonk Fah inside--one of them appeared to be inspecting the basement.

 She could. . . .

 She froze. She couldn’t feel Jewels. She glanced to the side, but the shorter woman was there, hands on hips, muttering to herself at being left behind with the ‘kids.’ Her Lifeless abomination was beside her. Vivenna hadn’t expected to be able to feel it--the thing obviously wasn’t alive enough. But, why couldn’t she feel Jewels?

 She had a sharp moment of panic, thinking that Jewels might be some twisted Lifeless creation that could imitate a thinking person. Then, however, she realized that there was a much more simple explanation.

 Jewels had no Breath. She was a Drab.

 It was difficult to tell, even for Vivenna. And yet, now that she knew what to look for, it seemed more and more obvious. There wasn’t as much of a sparkle of life in Jewels’ eyes. She seemed more grumpy, less pleasant. She seemed to put others on edge.

 Plus, Jewels never noticed that Vivenna was watching her. Whatever sense it was that made others glance about if they were watched for too long, Jewels didn’t have it.

 Vivenna turned away anyway, and found herself blushing. Seeing a person without Breath. . .it felt like looking at someone when they were changing. Seeing them exposed.

 Poor woman, she found herself thinking. I wonder how it happened. Had she sold it herself? Or, had it been taken from her? Suddenly, Vivenna felt awkward. Why should I have so much, when she has such little? It seemed so ostentatious.

 She felt Denth approach before he actually pushed the door open. It looked ready to fall off its hinges.

 “Safe,” he said. Then, he eyed Vivenna. “You don’t have to be involved with this, if you don’t want to waste your time, princess. Tonk Fah can take you back to the house. We’ll question the man and bring you word.”

 She shook her head. “No. I want to hear what he has to say.”

 “I figured as much,” Denth said. “We’ll want to cancel our next appointment, though--last one for the day. Jewels, you--”

 “I’ll do it,” Peprin said.

 Denth paused, glancing at Vivenna.

 “Look, I may not understand everything that’s always going on around here,” Peprin said, sighing, “but I can deliver a simple message. I want to be useful.”

 “Let him go,” Vivenna said. “I trust him.” As long as the message isn’t too complicated. . . .

 Denth shrugged, but gave Peprin a set of instructions--including one telling him not to return to the house for several hours--and sent him off. Then, Denth waved for Vivenna and the others to enter the building. The nervous Idrian man--who’d said his name was Thame--went first. Vivenna followed him in, and was surprised to find the inside of the building looked quite a bit more sturdy than the outside had indicated.

 Tonk Fah found a stool, and he placed it down in the center of the room.

 “Have a seat, friend,” Denth said, gesturing.

 Thame nervously settled down on the stool.

 “Now,” Denth said, “why don’t you tell us how you found out that the princess was going to be in that particular restaurant today?”

 Thame glanced from side to side. “I just happened to be walking in the area and I--”

 Tonk Fah cracked his knuckles. Vivenna glanced at him, suddenly noticing that Tonk Fah seemed a lot more. . .dangerous than he had before. The idle, overweight man who liked to nap during conversations seemed to have vanished. In his place was a thug with sleeves rolled up, showing off muscles that bulged beneath the girth.

 Thame was sweating. To the side, Clod the Lifeless stepped into the room, his inhuman eyes falling into shadow, his face looking like something crafted from wax. An impersonation of a human.

 “I. . .run jobs for one of the bosses in the city,” Thame said. “Little things. Nothing big. When you’re one of us, you take what you can get.”

 “One of us?” Denth asked, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

 “Idrian.”

 “I’ve seen Idrians in good positions in the city, friend,” Denth said. “Merchants. Moneylenders.”

 “The lucky ones, sir,” Thame said, gulping. “They have their own money. People will work with anyone who has money. But, if you’re just a regular man, things are different. It’s hard to find jobs. People look at your clothing, listen to your accent, and they find others to do their work. Say we’re not trustworthy. Or that we’re boring. Or that we steal.”

 “And do you?” Vivenna found herself asking.

 Thame looked at her, then glanced down at the building’s dirt floor. “Sometimes,” he said. “But not then. Not when I was looking for work. I only do it now, when my boss asks me to.”

 “That still doesn’t answer how you knew where to find us, Friend,” Denth said quietly. His use of the word ‘friend,’ spoken so openly and invitingly when contrasted with Tonk Fah on one side and the Lifeless on the other made Vivenna shiver.

 “My boss talks too much,” Thame said. “He knew what was happening at that restaurant--sold the information to a couple of people. I heard for free.”

 Denth glanced at Tonk Fah.

 “But, everyone knows she’s in the city,” Thame said quickly. “I mean, how can you not know? We’ve all heard the rumors. The princess here, in T’Telir. It’s no coincidence. Things are bad, now, for us. Worse than they’ve ever been. You came to help, right?”

 “Friend,” Denth said. “I think it’s best that you forget this entire meeting happened. I realize that there will be temptation to sell information. But, I promise you, we can find out if you did that. And, we can--”

 “Denth, that’s enough,” Vivenna said. “Stop scaring the man.”

 The mercenary glanced at her, the move causing Thame to jump.

 “Oh, for the Colors sake,” she said walking forward,

kneeling beside Thame’s stool. “No harm will come to you, Thame. You have done well in seeking me out, and I trust you to keep news of our meeting quiet. But, tell me, if things are so bad in T’Telir, why not leave and return to Idris?”

 “Travel costs money, your highness,” he said. “You have to buy food and be able to not work for the weeks it takes to climb to the highlands. I can’t afford it--most of us can’t.”

 “And how many of you are there?” Vivenna asked.

 “Hundreds, your highness. Maybe thousands.”

 Vivenna nodded. “I want to meet with them.”

 “Princess--” Denth said, but she shot him a glance.

 “I can gather some together,” Thame said, nodding eagerly. “I promise. I’m known to a lot of them here.”

 “Good,” Vivenna said. “Because I have come to help. How shall we contact you?”

 “Ask around for Yeg,” he said. “That’s my boss.”

 Vivenna nodded, rising, then gestured toward the doorway. Thame fled without needing any further prompting. Jewels, who stood guarding the doorway, reluctantly stepped aside and let the man scuttle away.

 The room was silent for a moment.

 “Jewels,” Denth said. “Follow him.”

 She nodded, and was gone.

 Vivenna glanced back at the two mercenaries, expecting to find them angry at her.

 “Aw, did you have to let him go so fast?” Tonk Fah said, sitting down on the floor, looking morose. Whatever he’d done to look dangerous for the moment was gone, evaporating faster than water on metal in the sun.

 “There, now you’ve done it,” Denth said, eyeing her. “He’ll be sullen for the rest of the day.”

 “I never get to be the bad guy any more,” Tonk Fah said, falling back and staring up at the ceiling. His monkey wandered over and sat on the top of his ample stomach.

 “You’ll get over it,” Vivenna said, rolling her eyes. “Why were you so hard on him, anyway?”

 Denth shrugged. “You know what I like least about being a mercenary?”

 “I suspect that you’re going to tell me,” Vivenna said, tapping her foot.

 “People are always trying to fool you,” he said, sitting down on the floor beside Tonk Fah. “They all think you’re an idiot--assume that you’ll accept a simple story, like that man was telling.”

 He paused, as if expecting Tonk Fah to give his usual counterpoint to the conversation. Instead, however, the bulky mercenary just continued to stare at the ceiling. “Arsteel always got to be the mean one,” he said.

 Denth sighed, shooting her a “This is your fault” look. “Anyway,” he continued. “I couldn’t be sure that our friend there wasn’t a plant arranged to wait there by Garble. He could have pretended to be a loyal subject, gotten inside our defenses, then knifed you in the back. Best to be safe, princess.”

 She sat down on the stool, and was tempted to say that he was over-reacting, but. . .well, she had just seen him kill two men defending her. Her earlier feeling--that of the world being a much more dangerous place than she was accustomed to--returned. And so, she fell silent.

 I’m paying them, she thought. Or, well, Lemks paid them. Either way, I should probably just let them do their job.

 “Tonk Fah,” she said. “You can be the mean one next time.”

 He looked up. “You promise?”

 “Yes,” she said.

 “Can I yell at the person we are interrogating?”

 “Sure,” she said.

 “Can I growl at him?” he asked.

 “I. . .guess,” she said.

 “Can I break his fingers?”

 She frowned. “No!”

 “Not even the unimportant ones?” Tonk Fah asked. “I mean, people have five after all. The little ones don’t even do that much.”

 Vivenna paused, then Tonk Fah and Denth started laughing.

 “Oh, honestly,” she said, turning away from them. “I can never tell when you move from being serious to being ridiculous.”

 “That’s what makes it so funny,” Tonk Fah said, still chuckling.

 “Are we leaving, then?” Vivenna said, rising.

 “Nah,” Denth said. “Lets wait a bit. I’m still not sure that Garble isn’t looking for us. Best to lay low for a few hours before we go back to the house.”

 She frowned, glancing at Denth. Tonk Fah, amazingly, was already snoring softly. The thinner mercenary, however, was simply sitting on the dirt floor, legs crossed, back against the building’s wooden side.

 “I thought you said that Garble would let us go,” she said. “That he was just testing us--that he wanted to see how good you were.”

 “It’s a possibility,” Denth said. “I still think it’s likely. But, I’ve been known to be wrong. He might have let us go because he was worried about my sword being so close to him. Now that we’re gone, he could be having second thoughts. We’ll give it a few hours, then head back and ask my watchers if anyone has been poking around the house.”

 “Watchers?” Vivenna asked. “You have people watching our house?”

 “Of course,” Denth said. “Kids work cheap in the city. Worth the coin, even when you’re not protecting a princess of a rival kingdom.”

 She folded her arms, still standing. She didn’t feel like sitting, so she began to pace a bit.

 “I wouldn’t worry too much about Garble,” Denth said, eyes closed as he leaned against the wall. “This is just a precaution. He’s probably not interested in bothering with us any more than he already has.”

 She shook her head. “It makes sense that he’d want revenge, Denth,” she said. “You killed two of his men.”

 “Men can be cheap in this city too, princess.”

 “So, he was testing you,” Vivenna said. “But what would be the point of that? Provoking you to action? Seeing how fast you killed those men? Just to let you go?”

 “To see how much of a threat I was to annoy,” Denth said, shrugging, eyes still closed. “Or, more likely, to see if I was worth the pay I usually demand. Again, I wouldn’t worry about it so much.”

 She sighed, then wandered over to the window so she could watch the street.

 “You probably shouldn’t do that,” Denth said. “Just to be safe.”

 First he tells me not to worry, then he tells me not to let myself be seen, she thought with frustration, walking toward the back of the room, moving toward the door down to the cellar.

 “I wouldn’t do that, either,” Denth noted. “Stairs are broken in a few places. Not much to see, anyway. Dirt floor. Dirt walls. Dirt ceiling.”

 She sighed again, turning away from the door.

 “What is with you, anyway?” he asked, still not opening his eyes. “You haven’t been this nervous before.”

 “I don’t know,” she said. “Before I could leave when I wanted. Being locked in like this makes me anxious.”

 “Doesn’t sound like a very princessly attribute,” Denth noted.

 It isn’t, she realized. That sounded like something Siri would say. What is wrong with me lately?

 She forced herself to sit down on the stool again, folding her hands in her lap, reasserting control of her hair which had rebelliously started to lighten to a brown. “Please,” she said, forcing herself to sound calm and patient, “tell me of this place. Why did you select this building?”

 Denth cracked an eyelid. “We own it,” he finally said. “It’s nice to have safehouses around the city, should you need them. But, since we don’t use them very often, we buy the cheapest ones we can.”

 I noticed, Vivenna thought, but fell silent, recognizing how stilted her attempt at conversation had sounded. She sat quietly, looking down at her hands, trying to figure out just what had set her on edge.

 It was more than the fight. The truth was, she was worried about how long things in T’Telir were taking. Her father would have received her letter two weeks before. If that were the case, then he would immediately see the danger. Two of his daughters were in Hallandren, the kingdom that was planning to attack his own. She could only hope that when her small group of guides returned to T’Telir, they could convince him she was safe and keep him from doing anything rash.

 However, she was glad Denth had made her abandon Lemks’ house. If her father did send agents to retrieve her, they would probably try to find Lemks first--just as she had. However, a piece of her--a rebellious piece--wished that Denth hadn’t been so insightful. If they were still living in Lemks’ home, she might very well have been discovered already.

 And she might be on her way back to Idris.

 She spoke so firmly to others. Indeed, sometimes she felt quite firm. Those were the times when she thought about Siri, or her kingdom’s needs. However, those times--the princess times--were actually rather rare. The rest of the time, she wondered.

 What was she doing? She didn’t know about subterfuge or about warfare. Everything she was ‘doing’ to help Idris, Denth was really behind. True, her ability to show off the Royal Locks appeared to be useful, but somehow she suspected that Denth and his team would have found a way to work without her.

 The problem, then, was the growing understanding within herself. All of her preparation and learning amounted to rather little. She didn’t know how to go about saving Siri. She didn’t know what to do about the Breath within her. She didn’t even, really, know if she wanted to stay in this insane, over-crowded, over-colored city.

 In short, she was useless. And that was one thing, above all else, that her training had never prepared her to deal with.

 “You really want to meet with the Idrians?” Denth asked. Vivenna looked up. Outside, it was growing darker as evening approached.

 Do I? she thought. If my father has agents in the city, they might be there. And, would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

 But, if there’s something I can do for those people. . . .

 “I’d like to do it,” she said.

 He fell silent.

 “You don’t like it,” she said.

 He shook his head. “It will be hard to arrange, hard to keep quiet, and hard to protect you during. These meetings we’ve been having--they’ve all been with only one or two people, and always too place in controlled areas. Today’s mess excluded, I guess. This meeting with the Idrians, it will be different.”

 She nodded quietly. “I want to do it anyway. I. . .have to do something, Denth. Something useful. Being paraded before these contacts of yours is helping, I’m sure. But I need to do more. Something active.”

 She looked up--not at him, just staring out toward the windows, though she couldn’t see through them. Clod the Lifeless stood in the corner, where Jewels had left him. Vivenna shivered, looking away.

 “I want to help my sister,” she said. “And I want to be useful to my people. But, I can’t help feeling that I’m not doing much for Idris by staying in the city.”

 “Better than leaving,” Denth said.

 “Why?

 “Because if you left, there wouldn’t be anyone to pay me,” he said.

 She rolled her eyes.

 “I wasn’t joking that time,” Denth noted. “I really do like getting paid. However, there are better reasons to stay.”

 “Like what?” she asked.

 He shrugged. “Don’t know. Depends on you, I guess. Look, princess, I’m not the type to give brilliant advice or deep council. I’m a mercenary. You pay me, point, and I go stab things. But, I figure that if you think about it, you’ll find that running off to Idris is about the least useful thing you could do. You won’t be able to do anything there other than sit about and knit doilies, or whatever princesses usually do.

 “Your father has other heirs. Here, you might be largely ineffective--but there you’re redundant. Accomplish only a few simple things here, and your stay will be worth it for Idris. Even if it kills you.”

 He fell silent, stretching, resting back a little more.

 Pleasant man to have a conversation with, Vivenna thought to herself, shaking her head. She turned away from the mercenary, looking toward the doorway.

 And found Clod standing right beside her stool.

 She yelped despite herself, half-scrambling, half-falling backward. Denth was on his feet in a heartbeat, sword drawn, and Tonk Fah wasn’t far behind.

 Vivenna stumbled to her feet, her skirts getting in the way, and placed a hand against her chest, stilling her heartbeat. The Lifeless stood, watching her.

 “He does that sometimes,” Denth said, chuckling, though it sounded fake to Vivenna. “Just walks up to people.”

 “Like he was curious about them,” Tonk Fah said quietly.

 “They can’t be curious,” Denth said. “No emotion at all. Clod. Go back to your corner.”

 The Lifeless turned and began to walk.

 “No,” Vivenna said, shivering. “Put it in the basement.”

 “But, the stairs--” Denth said.

 “Now!” Vivenna snapped, hair tingeing red at the tips.

 Denth sighed. “Clod, to the cellar.”

 The Lifeless turned immediately, walking to the door at the back. As he went down the steps, Vivenna did indeed hear one crack slightly, but the creature apparently made it safely, judging by the sound of his footsteps.

 She sat back down, trying to calm her breathing.

 “Sorry about that,” Denth said.

 “I can’t feel him,” Vivenna said. “With the BioChroma. It’s unnerving. I. . .forget that he’s there, and don’t notice when he approaches.”

 Denth nodded. “I know.”

 “Jewels, too,” she said, glancing at him. “She is a Drab.”

 “Yeah,” Denth said, settling back down. “Has been since she was a child. Her parents sold her Breath to one of the Gods.”

 “They each need a Breath each week to survive,” Tonk Fah added.

 “How horrible,” Vivenna said. I really need to show her more kindness.

 “It’s really not so bad,” Denth said. “I’ve been without Breath before.”

 She glanced back at him. “You have?”

 He nodded. “Everyone goes through times when they’re a little bit. . .short on coin. The nice thing about Breath is that you can always buy one off someone else.”

 “Somebody is always selling,” Tonk Fah said.

 Vivenna shook her head, shivering. “But, you have to live without it, for a time. Get changed. Have no soul.”

 Denth laughed--and this time it was definitely genuine. “Oh, most of that is superstition, princess. Lacking Breath doesn’t change you that much.”

 “It makes you less kindly,” Vivenna said. “More irritable. Like. . . .”

 “Jewels?” Denth asked, amused. “Nah, she’d be like that anyway. I’m sure of it. Either way, when I’ve sold my Breath, I didn’t feel much different. You really have to pay attention to even notice it’s missing.”

 Vivenna turned away. She didn’t expect him to understand, having come from Hallandren. It was easy to call her beliefs superstition--but she could just as easily turn the words back on Denth. People saw what they wanted to see. If he felt the same without Breath, it seemed a fairly easy way to rationalize the selling of it--and then buying of another Breath off of an innocent person, who would then be left with less of a soul.

 The conversation died off, however, until Jewels returned a time later. She walked in and, once again, Vivenna barely noticed her.

 I’m starting to rely on that BioChromatic sense far too much, she thought with annoyance, standing as Jewels nodded to Denth.

 “He is who he says he is,” Jewels said. “I asked around, got three confirmations from people I kind of trust.”

 “All right, then,” Denth said, stretching and climbing to his feet. He kicked Tonk Fah awake. “Let’s carefully head back to the house.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Four

 Lightsong found Blushweaver in the grassy portion of the courtyard behind her palace. She was, apparently, enjoying the art of one of the city’s master gardeners.

 Lightsong strolled through the grass, entourage hovering about him, holding up a parasol to keep the sun off of him, and generally seeing that he was overly pampered--just like always. As he walked, he passed planters, pots, and even vases filled with various kinds of growing things. There were hundreds of different items, and many had been arranged into patterns, majestic temporary flowerbeds, and rows.

 It followed general Returned entertainment philosophy. The Gods were too Godly to leave the Court and visit gardens, so the gardens had to be brought to them. Such an enormous undertaking required dozens of workers and several carts full of plants. However, nothing was too much effort to deny the Gods.

 Except, perhaps, letting them leave.

 Blushweaver stood admiring one of the patterns of vases. She noticed Lightsong as he approached, his BioChroma making the flowers shine more vibrantly in the afternoon sunlight. She was wearing an amazingly modest dress, for her. It had no sleeves, of course, and looked to be constructed entirely out of a single wrap of green silk. However, it covered up the essential parts and then some before falling into tassels that hung down around her legs.

 “Lightsong, dear,” she said, smiling as he approached. “Visiting a lady in her home? How forward. Well, enough of this small talk. Let us retire to the bedroom.”

 He smiled, walking up beside her, then held up a sheet of paper.

 She paused, then accepted it. The front was covered with colored dots--the Artisan’s Language.

 “What is this?” she asked.

 “I figured I knew how our conversation would begin,” he said. “And so I saved us the trouble of having to go through--I had it written out beforehand.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, then read. “‘First off, Blushweaver says something that is mildly suggestive.’” She glanced at him. “Mildly suggestive? I mentioned the bedroom. I’d call that blatant.”

 “I underestimated you,” Lightsong said. “Please continue.”

 “‘Then, Lightsong says something to deflect her,’” Blushweaver read. “‘It is so incredibly charismatic and clever, however, so that she is left stunned by his brilliance and cannot speak for several minutes. . . .’ Oh, honestly, Lightsong. Do I have to read this?”

 “It’s a masterpiece,” he said. “Best work I’ve ever done. Please, the next part is important.”

 She sighed. “‘Blushweaver says something about politics which is dreadfully boring, but she balances that by wiggling her chest. After that, Lightsong apologizes for being so distant lately. He explains that he had to work out some things in his head.’” She paused, eyeing him. “Does this mean that you’re finally ready to be part of my plans?”

 He nodded. To the side, a group of the gardener’s workers moved forward, pulling away the flowers. They returned in waves, quickly building a pattern of blossoming trees in large pots around Blushweaver and Lightsong. It was just high enough to take advantage of their enhanced statures.

 “I don’t think that the queen is involved in a plot to take the throne,” Lightsong said. “I’ve spoken with her a few more times--always very briefly--but I am convinced.”

 “Then. . .why agree to join with me?” Blushweaver asked.

 He stood quietly for a moment, enjoying the beauty of the blossoms. “Because,” he said. “I intend to see that you don’t crush her.”

 “My dear Lightsong,” Blushweaver said, smiling, pursing bright red lips. “I’m harmless.”

 He raised an eyebrow.

 “My dear,” she said, “you should never point out a lady’s lies. Anyway, I’m glad you came. We have work to do.”

 “Work?” he said, pausing. “That sounds like. . .work.”

 “Of course, dear,” she said, walking away. Workers immediately ran forward, pulling aside the small trees, clearing a path for her. The master gardener himself stood directing the men to form patterns, opening the pathway in an aesthetic way.

 Lightsong hurried a bit and caught up. “Work,” he said. “You know what my philosophy on that word is?”

 “I am under the subtle impression that you do not support it,” Blushweaver said.

 “Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Work, my dear Blushweaver, is like fertilizer.”

 “It makes people stink?”

 He smiled. “Well, I was thinking other lines, though that comparison is rather valid to. No, work is like fertilizer in that I’m very glad it exists--I just don’t ever want to get stuck in it.”

 “That’s unfortunate,” Blushweaver said, leaving the aisle of trees. “Because you just agreed to it.”

 He sighed. “I thought I smelled something.”

 “Oh, don’t be so boring,” she said, smiling to some workers as they lined her path with vases of flowers. “This is going to be fun.” She turned back, eyes twinkling. “Mercystar got attacked last night.”

#

 “Oh, my dear Blushweaver. It was positively tragic.”

 Lightsong raised an eyebrow. Mercystar was a voluptuous woman with a bit more weight on her than Blushweaver. Both were, of course, perfect examples of feminine beauty. Blushweaver was simply the lithe--yet busty--type and Mercystar the curvaceous--yet busty--sort. Mercystar lounged back on a couch, being fanned with large fern leaves by several of her serving men.

 She didn’t have Blushweaver’s subtle sense of style. There was a skill to choosing bright clothing that didn’t edge into garishness. Lightsong didn’t have it--but he had servants who did. Mercystar, likely, didn’t know that such a skill even existed.

 Though, he thought, orange and gold aren’t exactly the easiest colors to make look dignified.

 “Mercystar, dear,” Blushweaver said, sitting down beside the Goddesses. One of the servants provided a plush, colorful stool, sliding it beneath Blushweaver just as she moved to sit.

 “I can understand how you must feel,” Blushweaver said.

 “Can you?” Mercystar asked. “Can you possibly? This is terrible. Some. . .some miscreant snuck into my very home, accosting my servants! The home of a Goddess! Who would do such a thing?”

 “Indeed, he must have been deranged,” Blushweaver said calmly, soothingly. Lightsong stood beside her stool, hands clasped behind his back. An afternoon breeze blew across the courtyard, though the group was shaded by a pavilion. Some of Blushweaver’s garden workers had brought flowers and trees over, surrounding the canopy, making the entire place smell of flowers and pollen.

 “I can’t understand it,” Mercystar said. “The men at the gates are supposed to stop these kinds of things! Why do we have walls, if people can just walk in and break into our homes. I just don’t feel safe any more.”

 “I’m certain the guards will be more diligent in the future,” Blushweaver said.

 Lightsong frowned. Something felt. . .off to him about the entire experience. He glanced to the side, toward Mercystar’s mansion, where servants buzzed about, coming in and out of doors.

 “What was the intruder after, do you suppose?” he said, almost to himself. “Pieces of art, perhaps? Riches? Surely there are houses of merchants which would be much easier to rob.”

 “We know what they were after,” Blushweaver said smoothly.

 “We do?” Mercystar said, perking up.

 “Yes, dear,” Blushweaver said. “Only someone with no respect for tradition, propriety, or religion would dare trespass in the home of a God. Someone base. Disrespectful. Unbelieving. . . .”

 “An Idrian?” Mercystar said after a moment’s thought.

 “Did you ever wonder, dear,” Blushweaver said, “why they sent their youngest daughter to the God King instead of their eldest?”

 Mercystar frowned. “They did?”

 “Yes, dear,” Blushweaver said.

 “That’s rather suspicious now, isn’t it,” Mercystar said, frowning.

 “Something is going on in the Court of Gods, Mercystar,” Blushweaver said, leaning down. “Times could be dangerous for the crown in the future.”

 “Blushweaver,” Lightsong said, causing her to look over at him. “Might I speak with you for a moment?”

 She sighed, patted Mercystar’s hand, and then retreated with him from the pavilion, their servants and priests trailing behind.

 “What are you doing?” Lightsong said as soon as they were out of Mercystar’s earshot.

 “Recruitment,” Blushweaver said, a glint in her eye. “We’re going to need her Lifeless Commands if we’re going to be prepared.”

 “This isn’t about that,” Lightsong said. “We don’t know that an Idrian was the one who broke into her palace.”

 “Oh?” Blushweaver asked. “And you think it’s coincidence that this would happen now? Years pass without a break in, and then someone sneaks into one of our palaces now, with the war approaching?”

 Lightsong paused.

 “And,” Blushweaver continued, “whoever it was just happened to pick one of the four Returned who have Lifeless access Commands?”

 Lightsong glanced back at the palace. Blushweaver’s arguments held some merit, but. . .the two of them just didn’t know enough. He had an odd itch to look into things more.

 However, that sounded like work. He couldn’t really afford to begin involving himself in such things, particularly without a lot of complaining. It sat a bad precedent. So, he finally just nodded his head, and Blushweaver led them back to the pavilion.

 “Dear,” Blushweaver said, sitting quickly beside Mercystar, looking a little bit more anxious. She leaned in. “We’ve discussed, and we have decided to trust you.”

 Mercystar sat up a bit, frowning. “Trust me? With what?”

 “Knowledge,” Blushweaver whispered. “There are those of us who are worried that the Idrians aren’t content with their mountains, but are determined to infiltrate the lowlands as well.”

 “But. . .we’ll be joined by blood,” Mercystar said. “There will be a Hallandren God King with Royal blood on our throne.”

 “Oh?” Blushweaver said. “And could that not also be interpreted as an Idris king with Hallandren blood on the throne?”

 Mercystar paused. Then, oddly, she glanced at Lightsong. “Do you believe this?”

 Why did people look toward him so often? He did his best to discourage such behavior. And yet, they still tended to act like he was some kind of moral authority.

 “I think that. . .preparation would be wise for this event,” he said. “Though, of course, the same can be said for dinner.”

 Blushweaver shot him an annoyed look, though by the time she looked back at Mercystar, she was consoling again. “We understand that you’ve had a difficult day, Mercystar,” she said. “But please, consider our offer. We would like you to join with us in our preparations.”
 “What kind of preparations are you talking about?” Mercystar asked.

 “Simple ones,” Blushweaver said quickly. “Thinking, talking, planning. Eventually, if we think we have enough evidence, we will bring what we know to the God King for his consideration.”

 This seemed to ease Mercystar’s mind. She nodded. “Yes, I can see. Preparation. It would be wise. Just in case.”

 “Rest now, dear,” Blushweaver said, rising. She eyed Lightsong again, and once again they retreated from the pavilion, walking leisurely across the field of grass back toward Blushweaver’s own palace.

 “She’s a dear,” Blushweaver said, smiling.

 “You just say that because she’s easy to manipulate,” Lightsong noted.

 “Of course,” Blushweaver said. “I positively love people who do as they should. ‘Should’ being defined as whatever I think is best.”

 “At least you’re open about it,” Lightsong said.

 “To you, my dear, I’m as easy to read as a book.”

 He snorted. “Maybe one that hasn’t been translated to Hallandren yet.” He kept walking, though he slowed his step. He just didn’t feel that things back at Mercystar’s palace were finished yet.

 “You just say that because you’ve never really tried reading me,” she said, smiling at him. “Though, I must say that there is one thing about dear Mercystar that positively annoys me.”

 “And that is?”

 “Armies,” Blushweaver said, folding her arms. “Why did one such as that get command of five thousand Lifeless? It’s obviously a dire error in judgment. Particularly since I don’t have command of any troops.”

 “Blushweaver,” he said with amusement, “you’re the Goddess of honesty, communication, and interpersonal relationships. Why in the world would you be given stewardship over armies?”

 “There are lots of interpersonal relationships related to armies,” she said. “After all, what do you call one man hitting another with a sword? That’s interpersonal. Besides, I’d be far more wise with my armies than Mercystar.”

 “I’m sure,” Lightsong said, glancing back at Mercystar’s pavilion. What was bothering him so much?

 “Now,” Blushweaver said, “I should think that you’d appreciate my arguments, since relationships are--in fact--a bit of a war. As established by our relationship, dear Lightsong. We. . . .” She trailed off, then poked him in the shoulder. “Lightsong? Pay attention to me!”

 “Yes?”
 She folded her arms petulantly. “I must say, your banter has been decidedly weak today. I might just have to go find someone else to play with.”

 “Humm, yes,” he said, turning from Mercystar’s pavilion to look at her palace again. “Tragic. Now. . .the break in. It was just one person?”

 “Supposedly,” Blushweaver said. “It’s not important.”

 “And was anyone injured?”

 “A couple of servants,” Blushweaver said with a wave of the hand. “One dead was found dead. You should be paying attention to me, not that--”

 Lightsong paused in place. He turned toward her, frowning deeply. “Someone was killed?”

 She shrugged. “So they say.”

 He turned back to the pavilion. “I’m going to go back and talk to her some more.”

 “Fine,” Blushweaver snapped. “But you’ll do it without me. I have gardens to enjoy.”

 “All right,” Lightsong said, already walking. “I’ll talk to you later.”

 Blushweaver let out a huff of indignation, and a piece of him could imagine her, hands on hips, watching him go. The rest of him, however, was more focused on. . . .

 What? So some servants had been hurt. What bothered him so much? It wasn’t really his place to be involved in these kinds of things. And yet, he found himself walking up to Mercystar’s pavilion again, his servants and priests trailing behind.

 She was still reclining on her couch. She glanced at him, frowning. “Lightsong?”

 “I. . .just returned because I heard that one of your servants was killed in the attack.”

 “Ah, yes,” she said. “The poor man. What a tragedy. He will be blessed in the eternities, of course.”

 “How did it happen?”

 “It’s very odd, actually,” she said. “The two guards at the door were only knocked unconscious. After that, the intruder was discovered by four of my servants, who were walking through the service hallway. He fought them, knocked out one, killed another, and two escaped.”

 “What did he use?” Lightsong asked. “A sword? Or did he strangle the man?”

 Mercystar sighed. “I really don’t know,” she said with a wave of the hand. “My priests know more about it. I fear I am too traumatized to really pay attention to details.”

 “Would it be all right if I talked to the priests?” Lightsong asked.

 “If you must,” Mercystar said. “Though, one would think that you’d rather stay and comfort me. Have I mentioned exactly how out of peace I am?”

 “My dear Mercystar,” he said, nodding his head. “If you know anything of me, then you will realize that my leaving you alone is by far the best comfort I can offer. If you wish, I shall have one of my priests throw rocks at you--that is decidedly more pleasant an experience than speaking with me.”

 She frowned, looking up. “That. . .won’t be necessary.”

 “It was a joke, my dear,” he said, turning to go. “I am, unfortunately, quite bad at them. Scoot, you coming?”

 Llarimar, who stood--as always--with the rest of the priests looked over at him. “Your grace?”

 “No need to upset the palace servants any further,” Lightsong said. “I think that you and I alone will be sufficient for this exercise.”

 “As you command, your grace,” Llarimar said, sounding a bit confused. Once again, Lightsong’s servants found themselves being separated from their God. They stood, uncertainly, on the grass--like a group of children being abandoned by their parents.

 “What is this about, your grace?” Llarimar asked quietly as they walked up to the palace.

 “I honestly have no idea,” Lightsong said. “I just. . .feel like there’s more to what is going on here. The break in. The death of that man. Something is wrong.”

 Llarimar looked at him, a strange expression on the man’s face.

 “What?” Lightsong asked.

 “It is nothing, your grace,” Llarimar finally said. “This is just a very odd thing for you to do.”

 “I know,” Lightsong said, feeling confident about the decision nonetheless. “I honestly can’t say what prompted it. Curiosity, I guess.”

 “Curiosity that outweighs your desire to avoid doing. . .well, anything at all?”

 Lightsong shrugged. And yet, he felt energized as he walked into the palace. For some reason, his normal lethargy felt weaker, and instead he felt an excitement. Almost a familiarity.

 He found a group of priests chatting inside the servant’s corridor. He walked right up to them, and they turned with shock, obviously surprised to find a God walking through their hallway.

 “Ah, good,” he said. “I assume you can tell me more of this break in?”

 “Your grace,” one said, all three bowing their heads. “I assure you, we have everything under control. There is no danger to you or your people.”

 “Ah, good,” Lightsong said, looking over the corridor. “Is this where the man was killed, then?”

 They glanced at each other.

 “Over there,” one of them reluctantly said, pointing to a turn in the hallway.

 “Wonderful. Accompany me, if you please.” Lightsong walked up to the section indicated, where a group of workers were removing the boards from the floor, probably to be replaced. Bloodstained wood, no matter how well-cleaned, would not do for a Goddess’s home.

 “Hum,” Lightsong said. “Looks messy. How did it happen?”

 “We. . .aren’t sure, your grace,” said one of the reluctant priests. “The intruder knocked the men at the doorway unconscious, but did not otherwise harm them.”

 “Yes, Mercystar mentioned that,” Lightsong said. “But then he fought with four of the servants?”

 “Well, ‘fought’ isn’t the right word,” the priest said, sighing, obviously realizing that Lightsong wasn’t going to let them shoo him away. Though he wasn’t their God, he was a God, and they were priests. They would be bound by oath to answer his questions.

 “He immobilized one of them with an Awakened rope,” the priest continued. “Then, while one of the servants remained behind to distract the intruder, the other two ran for aid. The intruder quickly knocked the remaining man unconscious. At that time, the one who had been tied up was still alive.”

 The priest glanced at his colleagues. “When help finally came--delayed by a Lifeless animal that was causing confusion in the building--they found the one man unconscious from a blow to the head. The other, still tied in the rope, was dead. Stabbed through the heart with a dueling blade.”

 Lightsong nodded, kneeling beside the broken up boards. The servants who had been working there retreated, bowing their heads before him. He wasn’t certain what he expected to find, however. The ground had been scrubbed clean, then torn apart. However, there was a patch of. . .something a short distance away. He walked over.

 The wood was grayed slightly in a patch on the floor. He knelt, inspecting it.

 Completely devoid of color, he thought. He looked up, focusing on the priests. “An Awakener, you say?”

 “Undoubtedly, your grace.”

 He looked back down at the grey patch. There’s little chance an Idrian did this, he realized. Not if he used Awakening. And. . .what was that about a Lifeless? “What was this creature you discovered?”

 “A Lifeless squirrel, your grace,” one of the men said. “The intruder used it as a distraction.”

 “Well made?” he asked.

 They nodded. “Using modern Command words,” one said, “and it even has ichor-alcohol instead of blood. Took us the better part of the night to catch the thing!”

 “I see,” Lightsong said, standing. “But the intruder escaped? Ran away, did he?”

 “Yes, your grace,” one of them said.

 “What do you suppose he was after?”

 The priests paused.

 “We don’t know, your grace,” one of them said. “We scared him away before he could obtain his goal--one of our men saw him fleeing back out the way he had come in, soon after he released the squirrel. Apparently, the resistance was too much for him.”

 “We think that he must have been a petty thief, your grace,” another said. “Here to try and sneak into the gallery and steal the art there.”

 “Sounds likely enough to me,” Lightsong said, standing. “Good work with this, and all that.” He turned, walking down the hallway. He felt a strange sense of surrealness.

 The priests were lying to him.

 He wasn’t even certain how he could tell. Yet, he knew it--knew it deep inside, with some instincts he hadn’t realized that he possessed.

 And, instead of bothering him, for some reason the lies excited him.

 “Your grace,” Llarimar said, hurrying up. “Did you find what you wanted?”

 “That was no Idrian who broke in,” Llarimar said quietly as they walked out into the sunlight. “It was an Awakener.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow. “There have been cases of Idrians coming to Hallandren and buying themselves Breath, your grace.”

 “And have you ever heard of one making a Lifeless?”

 Llarimar fell quiet, frowning as they walked. “No, your grace,” he finally admitted.

 “Idrians hate Lifeless. Consider them abominations, or some nonsense. Either way, it wouldn’t make sense for an Idrian to try and get in like that, making such a ruckus. What would be the point? Assassinating a Returned? That would only bring retaliation.”

 “So, you believe that it was a thief?”

 “Of course not,” Lightsong said. “A petty thief with enough Breath that he can waste one creating a permanent Lifeless, just so that he’d have a distraction? Whoever broke in, he was already rich. Besides, why sneak through the servant’s hallway? There are no valuables there. The inside of the palace, while more dangerous to travel through, would have held far more wealth.”

 Llarimar fell quiet again. He looked over at Lightsong, that same curious expression from before showing on his face. “That’s. . .some very clever reasoning, your grace.”

 “I know,” Lightsong said. “I feel positively unlike myself. Perhaps I need to go get drunk.”

 “You can’t get drunk.”

 “Ah, but I certainly enjoy trying.”

 They walked back toward his palace, picking up his servants on the way, quiet for the rest of the walk. Llarimar seemed unsettled for some reason. Lightsong, however, simply felt excited--though he didn’t know why.

 Murder in the Court of Gods, he thought. True, it’s only a simple servant--but servants are people too, and I’m supposed to be a God for all people, not just the important ones.

 I wonder how long it’s been since someone was killed in the Court? Hasn’t happened in my lifetime, certainly.

 Those priests were hiding things. Why had the intruder released a distraction--particularly such an expensive one--if he was simply going to run away? He’d had little trouble fighting the guards he’d run across. The servants of the Returned were not soldiers or warriors. So, why had he turned back so easily?

 All good questions. Good questions that he, of all people, shouldn’t have bothered to wonder about. And yet, he did.

 All the way back to the palace, through a nice meal, and even into the night.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-five

 Siri’s servants clustered around her uncertainly as she walked into the chaotic room. Scribes and priests looked up in shock as they saw her, wearing a blue and white gown with a ten-foot train. Some immediately scrambled to their feet, bowing. Others just stared as she passed, her serving women doing their best to hold her train in a dignified manner.

 Siri continued forward, determined, through the chamber--which seemed more like a hallway than a proper room. Tables lined the walls, stacks of paper cluttered those tables, and scribes worked the papers. The walls were, of course, the same black color as the outside of the building. Colored rooms were only in the center of the palace, where the God King and Siri spent most of their time. Separately, of course.

 Though, things are a little different at night, she thought, smiling to herself. It felt very. . .conspiratorial of her to be teaching him letters. She had a secret that she was keeping from the rest of the kingdom, a secret that involved one of the most powerful men in the entire world. That gave her a thrill.

 She supposed that she should have been more worried that the priests would discover what she was doing. And, at times--when she was more thoughtful--the reality of Bluefingers’ warnings did worry her.

 However, the experience still thrilled her.

 She wove between the desks, where scribes still watched her with shocked eyes. This was the servant’s section of the palace, as marked by the black, unadorned walls.

 I wonder why the bed chamber is out here, she thought. Outside the main body of the palace, in the black part.

 Either way, the servants’ section of the palace--God King’s bedchamber excluded--was the last place that the scribes expected to be disturbed by their queen. Siri noticed that some of her serving women shot apologetic glances at the men in the room as Siri arrived at the doors on the other side. A servant stepped inside, pushed open the door for her, and she entered the room beyond.

 A group of priests stood, leafing through books, in the medium sized chamber. They looked over at her in shock. One dropped his book to the floor.

 “I,” Siri proclaimed, “want some books!”

 The priests stared at her. “Books?” one of them finally asked.

 “Yes,” Siri said, hands on hips. “This is the palace library, is it not?”

 “Well, yes,” the priest said, glancing at his companions. All wore the robes of their office, and this day’s colors were violet and silver.

 “Well, then,” Siri said. “I’d like to take some of the books. I am bored with normal entertainment, and shall be reading to myself in my spare time.”

 “Surely you don’t want these books, Vessel,” another priest said. “They are of an unentertaining sort--mostly about religion or city finances. Surely something more appropriate is in order. A book of stories, perhaps.”

 Siri raised an eyebrow. “And where might I find such a ‘more appropriate’ volume?”

 “We could have a reader come and bring the book from the city collection,” the priest said, stepping forward with a smooth gait. “He’d be here shortly.”

 Siri paused. “No. I do not think I like that option. I shall take some of these books here.”

 “No, you shall not,” a new voice said from behind.

 Siri turned. Tridees, High Priest of the God King, stood behind her, fingers laced, face bearing a frown.

 “You cannot refuse me,” Siri said. “I am your queen.”

 “Actually, I can and will refuse you, Vessel,” Tridees said. “You see, these books are quite valuable, and should something happen to them, the kingdom would suffer grave consequences. Even our priests are not allowed to bear them out of the room.”

 He paused, eying her. “If you absolutely must read them, you can stay in here and do it.”

 She glanced at the room, and thought of the stuffy priests standing in a flock around her, listening to her sound out words, making a fool of herself.

 “Are there any books on history?” she asked.

 “Alas, Vessel,” Tridees said. “Those are kept in the city collection. We could have a reader come and--”

 “Not right now,” Siri said. “Perhaps another time.” She eyed the stacks of books on shelves. There weren’t as many as she had expected there to be. Still, she was so close. . . .

 “And if I ordered you to let me take some of these?” she said to Tridees.

 “You are our queen, Vessel,” he said. “But you are not Returned. These are the property of a God. Susebron has made it clear that he wishes the books to stay here.”

 Oh he has, has he, Siri thought, remembering her conversation--written, halting, yet open--with the God King the very night before. He was getting quite good at writing. He had not mentioned ordering the books to remain in the library.

 But, then, for Tridees and the priests, having a tongueless god was very convenient. The priests could claim that he’d told them whatever seemed good at the moment, and he could never correct them.

 “I’ll be going, then,” she said, trailing out of the cramped room.

#

 I told you that they would not let you have the books, the God King wrote.

 Siri rolled her eyes. Flopping back on the bed. She still wore her evening dress, even though it was a bit bulky. For some reason, being able to communicate with the God King made her even more shy around him. She only took off the dresses right before she went to sleep--which, lately, was getting later and later in the night.

 She looked up. Susebron sat in his usual place--not on the mattress, as he had that first night. Instead, he had pulled his chair up beside the bed. He still seemed so large and imposing. At least, until he looked up at her, his face open, honest. He waved her back toward him, where he sat with a charcoal board, writing with a bit of charcoal that she’d smuggled in.

 You should not anger the priests so, he wrote. His spelling, of course, was awful, but that was to be expected.

 “The priests?” she said. “They frustrate me! They intentionally do things to spite me.”

 They are good men, he wrote. They work very hard to maintain my kingdom.

 “They cut out your tongue,” she said.

 The God King sat quietly for a few moments. It was necessary, he wrote. I have too much power.

 She moved over, getting a little closer to him. As usual, he shied back a little bit when she approached, moving his arm out of the way, keeping her from touching him. There was no arrogance in the posture. She was just beginning to think that he had very little experience with touching.

 “Susebron,” she said quietly. “These men, they are not looking after your best interests. They did more than cut out your tongue. They refused to teach you to read, and they speak in your name, doing whatever they please since you can’t contradict them.”

 They are not my enemies, he wrote stubbornly. They are good men.

 “Oh?” she said. “And then why do you hide from them the fact that you’re learning to read?”

 He paused again, glancing downward.

 So much humility for one who has ruled Hallandren for fifty years, she thought. In many ways, he acts like a child.

 I do not want them to know, he finally wrote. I do not want to upset them.

 “I’m sure,” Siri said flatly.

 He paused. You are sure? he wrote. Does that mean you believe me?

 “No,” Siri said. “That was sarcasm, Susebron.”

 He frowned. I do not know this thing. Sarkazm.

 “Sarcasm,” she said, spelling it. “It’s. . . .” she trailed off. “It’s when you say one thing, but you mean the opposite.”

 He frowned at her, then furiously erased his board and began writing again. This thing makes no sense. Why not say what you mean?

 “Because,” Siri said. “It’s just like. . .oh, I don’t know. It’s a way to be clever about how you make fun of people.”

 Make fun of people? he wrote.

 God of Colors! Siri thought, trying to think of how to explain. It seemed ridiculous to her that he would know nothing of mockery. And yet, he had lived his entire life as a revered deity and monarch. Nobody would have dared make fun of him.

 “Mockery is when you. . .say things to tease,” Siri said. “Things that might be hurtful to someone, but you say them in an affectionate way, or in a playful way. Or, sometimes you just say them to be mean. Sarcasm is one of the ways we mock--we say the opposite, but in an exaggerated way.”

 How do you know if the person is affectionate, playful, or mean?

 “I don’t know,” Siri said. “It’s the way they say it, I guess.”

 The God King sat, looking confused but thoughtful. You are very normal, he finally wrote.

 Siri frowned. “Um. Thank you?”

 Was that good sarcasm? he wrote. Because in reality, you are actually quite strange.

 She smiled. “I try my best.”

 He paused.

 “That was sarcasm again,” she said. “I don’t ‘try’ to be strange. It just happens.”

 He looked at her. How had she ever been frightened of this man? How had she misunderstood? The look in his eyes, it wasn’t arrogance or emotionlessness. It was the look of a man who was trying very hard to understand the world around him. A simple earnestness.

 However, he himself was not simple. The speed at which he’d responded to her teaching proved that. He had learned incredibly fast. True, he’d already understood the spoken portion of the language--and he’d also memorized all of the letters in the book years before meeting her. It had only taken her explaining the rules of spelling and sound for him to make the final jump to being able to read.

 Still, she found it amazing how quickly he picked things up. He was so determined. She smiled at him, and he hesitantly smiled back.

 “Why do you say that I’m strange?” she finally asked.

 You do not do things like other people, he wrote. Everyone else bows before me all of the time. Nobody talks to me. Even the priests, they only occasionally give me instructions--and this they haven’t done in years.

 “Does it offend you that I don’t bow, and that I talk to you like a friend?”

 He erased his board. Offend me? Why would it offend me? Do you do it in sarcasm?

 “No,” she said quickly. “I really do like talking to you.”

 Then I do not understand.

 “Everyone else is afraid of you,” Siri said. “Because of how powerful you are.”

 But, they took away my tongue to make me safe.

 “No, not the BioChroma,” Siri said. “Your power over armies and people and things. You’re the God King. You could order anyone in the kingdom killed.”

 But why would I do that? he wrote. I would not kill a good person. They must know that.

 Siri sat back, resting on the plush bed, fire crackling in the hearth behind them. “I know that, now,” she said. “But nobody else does. They don’t know you, but they know how powerful you are. So they fear you. And, so, they show their respect for you.”

 He paused. And so, you do not respect me?

 “Of course I do,” she said, sighing. “I’ve just never been very good at following rules and such. In fact, if someone tells me what to do, I usually find myself wanting to do the opposite.”

 That is very strange, he wrote. I thought all people did what they were told.

 “I think you’ll find that most do not,” she said, smiling.

 That will get you into trouble.

 “Is that what the priests taught you.”

 He shook his head, then reached over and took out his book. The book of stories for children. He brought it with him always, and she could see from his reverent touch that he valued it greatly.

 It’s probably his only real possession, she thought. Everything else is taken from him every day, then restored new the next morning.

 This book, he wrote. My mother read the stories to me when I was a child. I memorized them all, before she was taken away. It speaks of many children who do not do as they are told. They are often eaten my monsters.

 “Oh, are they?” Siri said, smiling.

 Do not be afraid, he wrote. My mother taught me that the monsters are not real. But I remember the lessons the stories taught. Obedience is good. You should treat people well. Do not go off into the jungle by yourself. Do not lie. Do not hurt others.

 Siri’s smile deepened. She was beginning to get a view of this God King--beginning to understand how he came to be as he was. All of the learning in his life, he’d either received from moralistic folk tales or from priests who were teaching him to be a figurehead. Once she realized that, and the honest, uncomplicated man that he had become was not so difficult to understand.

 Yet, what had prompted him to break that learning and ask her to teach him? He had just said that lying was bad, and yet he was so anxious to learn that he would keep some very important things secret from the men he had been taught all of his life to obey and trust.

 He was not so innocent as he appeared.

 “These stories,” she said. “Your desire to treat people well. Is that what kept you from. . .taking me on any of those nights when I first came into the room?”

 From taking you? I do not understand.

 Siri blushed, hair turning red to match. “I mean. . .why did you just sit there?”

 Because I did not know what else to do, he said. I knew that we need to have a child. So, I sat and waited for it to happen. We must be doing something wrong, for no child has come.

 Siri paused, then blinked. He couldn’t possibly. . . . “You don’t know how to have children?”

 In the stories, he wrote, a man and a woman spend the night together. Then they have a child. Yet, we spent many nights together, and there were no children.

 “And nobody--none of your priests--explained the process to you?”

 No. What process do you mean?

 She sat for a moment. No, she thought, feeling herself blush. I am not going to have that conversation with him.

 “I think we’ll talk about it another time,” she said.

 It was a very strange experience when you came into the room that first night, he wrote. I must admit, I was very scared of you.

 Siri paused, smiling as she remembered her own terror. It hadn’t even occurred to her that he would be frightened. Why would it have? He was the God King. He wasn’t supposed to be scared of anything.

 “So,” she said, tapping the bedspread with one finger, “you were never taken to other women?”

 No, he wrote. I did find it very interesting to see you naked. You are very much different from men. I enjoyed it very much.

 She flushed, though her hair had long since turned red, and had just decided to stay that way. “That’s not what we’re talking about right now,” she said. “I want to know about other women. No mistresses? No concubines?”

 No.

 “They really are scared of you having a child,” she said, frowning.

 Why would they be? he wrote. They sent you to me.

 “Only after fifty years of rule,” she said. “And only under very controlled circumstances, with the proper linage to make a child with the bloodline they want. And now, Bluefingers thinks that child might be a danger to me.”

 I do not understand why, he wrote. This is what everyone wants. There must be an heir.

 “Why?” Siri said. “You still look like you’re barely two decades old. You don’t seem to be aging very quickly because of your BioChroma.”

 Without an heir, the kingdom is in danger. Should I be killed, there will be nobody to rule.

 “And that wasn’t a danger for the last fifty years?” she asked.

 He paused, frowning, then slowly erased his board.

 “They must think that you’re in danger,” she said slowly. “But, not from sickness or the like--even I know that Returned don’t suffer those kinds of diseases. In fact, do they even age at all?”

 I don’t know, the God King wrote.

 “How did the other God Kings die?” she asked.

 There have only been four, he wrote. I do not know how they died for certain.

 “Only four kings in several hundred years. . . .” she said, mostly to herself. “Dead of mysterious circumstances.”

 My father was dead before I was old enough to remember him, Susebron wrote. I was told he gave his life for the kingdom--that he released his BioChromatic Breath, like all Returned can, to cure a terrible disease. Regular Returned can only cure one person. A God King, however, can cure many. That is what I was told.

 “There must be a record of that, then,” she said. “Somewhere in those books the priests have guarded up so tightly.”

 I am sorry that they would not let you read them, he wrote.

 She waved an indifferent hand. “It was a long shot in the first place. I’ll need to find another way to get at those histories.” Having a child is the danger, she thought. That’s what Bluefingers said. So. . .whatever threat there is to my life, it will only come after there is an heir.

 He mentioned a threat to the God King too. That almost makes it sound like the danger comes from the priests themselves.

 But, what reason would they have to want to harm their own God?

 She glanced over at Susebron, who was flipping intently through his book of stories. She smiled at the look of concentration on his face as he deciphered the text.

 Well, she thought, considering what he knows of sex, I’d say that we don’t have to worry much about having a child in the near future.

 Of course, she was growing more and more worried that the lack of a child would prove just as dangerous as the presence of one.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Six

 Vivenna went among the people of T’Telir, and couldn’t help feeling that every one of them recognized her.

 It was a silly feeling, one she fought down intentionally. It was a miracle that Thame--who had come from her own home city--had recognized her. Even if the people around her had heard that there was another Idrian princess in the city, they would have no way of connecting Vivenna to that person.

 That was particularly true because of the clothing she wore. Immodest reds and yellows layered one atop another on the dress, all of them far brighter than she would have liked. Yet, the dress had been the only one that Peprin and Tonk Fah had been able to find that met her stringent requirements for neckline and hem.

 The tube-like dress was after a foreign cut, apparently, from across the Inner Sea. It came down almost to her ankles, and though the bodice was a tad more exposing than she would have liked, the cloth covered her chest almost up to the neck, and had full sleeves. It would have to do.

 Though, rebelliously, she did find herself shooting glances at the other women in their loose, short skirts and sleeveless tops. That much skin was scandalous, but with the sun blazing overhead and the cursed lowland humidity, she could almost see exposing herself in such a way.

 After several weeks in the city, she was beginning to get the hang of moving with the flow of traffic. She wasn’t jostled or bumped as much, and she felt a little more secure moving with the crowds, wearing clothing similar to their own.

 She still wasn’t sure she wanted to be out at all. But, Denth had been persuasive.

 You know the worst thing that can happen to a bodyguard? he had asked. Letting your charge get killed when you aren’t even there. We have a small team, princess. We can either divide the team and leave you behind with one guard, or you can come with us on this attack. However, I don’t trust that you’ll be any safer in the house than you would be out with us. Personally, I’d like having you where I can keep an eye on you.

 And so she’d come. Dressed in one of her new gowns, hair turned an uncomfortable--yet un-Idrian--yellow, and left loose, blowing behind her. She walked around the square, as if out on a stroll, keeping moving more so that she wouldn’t look nervous than for any other reason.

 The location for the day’s activities was a city garden square. The people of T’Telir liked gardens--they had all kinds of them all over the city. In fact, from what Vivenna had seen, most of the city practically was a garden. Palms and ferns grew on every street, and exotic flowers bloomed year round.

 Here, however, the market curved around a more organized garden of a square. Four streets crossed, with four plots of cultivated ground forming a checker-board pattern around them. A circular plot of ground in the center sprouted with a dozen different palms.

 The buildings surrounding the gardens were more rich than the ones in the more haphazard market up the way. And, while there was a lot of foot traffic, people made certain to stick to the sidewalks, for carriages were common here. This was an upscale shopping district. No tents. Fewer performers. Higher quality--and more expensive--shops.

 Vivenna strolled along the perimeter of the garden block on the northwestern side. There were ferns and grass to her right. Shops of a quaint, rich, and--of course--colorful variety lay across the street to her left. Lounging beside one of these shops, she caught sight of Tonk Fah and Peprin--who, she noticed with displeasure, had taken to wearing a pair of bright blue pants with his green hat and red vest. Peprin had the monkey on his shoulder, and was talking animatedly about something. When he noticed Vivenna, he raised a hand to wave, but--fortunately--Tonk Fah elbowed him in the stomach.

 Vivenna kept walking. Jewels trailed her somewhere in the crowd, keeping an eye on her. The woman was quite good--Vivenna only rarely caught a glimpse of her, and that was because she’d been told where to look. That, also, made her feel more safe.

 She never saw Denth. He was there somewhere, far too subtle for her to sopt. However, as she reached the end of the street and turned around to walk back, she did catch sight of Clod. The Lifeless stood, still as one of the D’Denir statues that lined the gardens, watching the crowds pass. Most of the people ignored him.

 Denth was right. Lifeless really were taken for granted in Hallandren. Now that she knew what to look for, she’d begun seeing others around. Several walked along the market sidewalk, carrying bags and things for their owners. Few of these were as muscular or as tall as Clod--apparently, Lifeless came in as many shapes and sizes as people. However, they were there. Guarding shops. Acting as packmen. Sweeping the walkway. All around her.

 She continued to walk. She caught a brief glimpse of Jewels in the crowd as she passed, but the woman did not acknowledge Vivenna. That was as it should be.

 How does she manage to look so relaxed? Vivenna thought. They all did that. Danger was approaching at a furious pace, yet each of the mercenaries looked as relaxed and calm as if they were having a leisurely picnic meal.

 Don’t think about the danger, Vivenna thought, clinching her fists. Instead, she focused on the gardens.

 She tried not to be impressed, but that just wasn’t working as well as it once had. The truth was, she was a little bit jealous of the T’Telir. People lounged in the gardens, sitting on the grass, lying in the shade of trees, children playing and laughing. Her people had nothing of this sort. True, they had the fields and the open mountains. Yet, there was something. . .compelling about the cultivated beauty of the gardens.

 D’Denir statues ran in a solemn line, arms out raised, weapons at the ready, as if in defense of the people around them. Trees climbed high into the sky, sending out branches, strange flower-like bundles hanging down from various limbs. Wide-petaled flowers bloomed--several patches of them were actually Tears of Edgli.

 Was it really that bad to bring in some things from nature, then plant them all together like this? Was it so bad to have them close, rather than forcing people to travel for hours just to see a single field of flowers?

 Her people didn’t think it was right. Austre had placed the flowers where he wanted them. To bring them back, to use them to adorn a room or house, was to seek ostentation. Yet, was it ostentatious to plant them in the middle of the city, where all were free to enjoy them? Rich shopping district or not, Vivenna saw people from all economic walks enjoying the grass, ferns, and beauty.

 She turned away. Yet, her BioChroma continued to sense the beauty. The compact life, so much in one area, was like a buzz inside of her chest, exciting her.

 No wonder they like to live so close together in one city, she thought, noticing how a group of flowers scaled in color, fanning toward the inside of their planter. And, if you’re going to live this compactly, the only way to see nature would be to bring it in and plant it.

 “Help! Fire!”

 Vivenna spun, as did most of the other people on the street. The building Tonk Fah and Peprin had been standing next to was burning. Vivenna didn’t continue to gawk, however, but turned toward the center of the gardens. There, she saw a rich carriage clopping along. Most of the people in the garden itself were stunned, looking toward the smoke billowing into the air.

 Distraction one.

 People ran forward to help, crossing the street, causing carriages to pull up shortly. At that moment, Clod stepped forward--surging with the crowd--and swung a club at the leg of a horse. Vivenna couldn’t hear the leg break, but she did see the beast scream and fall, upsetting the carriage it had been pulling. A trunk fell from the top of the vehicle, plunging toward the street.

 The carriage belonged to one Faded, high priest of the God Stillmark. Denth’s intelligence said the carraige would be carrying valuables. Even if it wasn’t, a high priest in danger would draw a lot of attention.

 The trunk hit the street. And, in a twist of good fortune, it shattered, spraying out gold coins.

 Distraction two.

 Vivenna caught a glimpse of Jewels standing on the other side of the carriage. She looked across at Vivenna, and nodded. Time to go. As people either ran toward gold or fire, Vivenna walked away. Nearby, Denth would be raiding one of the shops with a gang of thieves he’d wrangled into the task. They got to keep the goods. He just wanted to make certain they disappeared.

 On her way out of the garden square, Vivenna was joined by Jewels and Peprin. She was surprised to feel how quickly her heart was thumping. Yet, almost nothing had happened. No real danger. No threat to herself. Just a couple of intentional accidents.

 But, then, that was the idea.

#

 Hours later, Denth and Tonk Fah still hadn’t returned to the house. Vivenna sat quietly on their new furniture, hands in her lap. The furnature was green. Apparently, white was not an option in T’Telir.

 “What time is it?” Vivenna asked quietly.

 “I don’t know,” Jewels snapped, standing beside the room’s window, looking out at the street.

 Patience, Vivenna told herself. It’s not her fault she’s so abrasive. She had her Breath stolen.

 “Should they be back yet?” Vivenna asked calmly.

 Jewels shrugged. “Maybe. Depends on if they decided to go to a safe house to let things cool down or not.”

 “I see. How long do you think we should wait?”

 “As long as we have to,” Jewels said. “Look, do you think you could just not talk to me? I’d really appreciate it.” She turned back to look out the window.

 Vivenna stiffened at the insult. Patience! she told herself. Understand the other person’s place. That’s what the Five Visions teach.

 Vivenna stood up, then walked quietly over to Jewels. Tentatively, she laid an arm on the other woman’s shoulder. Jewels jumped immediately--obviously, without Breath, it was harder for her to notice when people approached her.

 “It’s all right,” Vivenna said. “I understand.” Then, she turned to go.

 “Understand?” Jewels asked. “Understand what.”

 “They took your Breath,” Vivenna said. “They had no right to do something so terrible.”

 There was silence for a moment, and Vivenna continued on to the stairs. And then, Jewels started laughing.

 Vivenna paused, glancing back.

 “You think you understand me?” Jewels asked. “What? You feel sorry for me because I’m a Drab?”

 “Your parents shouldn’t have done what they did.”

 “My parents served our God King,” Jewels said. “My Breath was given to him directly. It’s a greater honor than you could possibly understand.”

 Vivenna stood quietly for a moment, absorbing that comment. “You believe in the Iridescent Tones?”

 “Of course I do,” Jewels said. “I’m a Hallandren, aren’t I?”

 “But the others--”

 “Tonk Fah is from Pahn Kahl,” Jewels said. “And I don’t know where the Colors Denth is from. But I’m from T’Telir itself.”

 “But surely you can’t still worship those. . .gods,” Vivenna said. “Not after what was done to you.”

 “What was done to me?” Jewels seemed to find the concept very amusing. “Well, Princess perfect, I’ll have you know that I gave away my breath willingly.”

 “But, weren’t you a child?”

 Jewels nodded. “Children can choose. I was eleven, and my parents gave me the option. I made the right one. My father had been in the dye industry, but had slipped and fallen on some crushed flower petals. The damage to his back wouldn’t let him work, and my family had six children. By selling my Breath, we got enough money to live for years!”

 “No price is worth a soul,” Vivenna said. “You were--”

 “Stop judging me!” Jewels snapped. “You don’t know anything, little Idrian. Do you know what it’s like to watch your brothers and sisters starve? My parents had already sold their Breath to get enough money to start the business, years before.

 “But, it was more than that. I was proud to sell my breath. I still am. A piece of me lives inside of the God King. Because of me, he continues to breathe. I’m part of this kingdom, in a way that few others are.”

 Jewels shook her head, turning away. “That’s why we get annoyed by you Idrians. So high. So certain that what you do is right. If your God asked you to give up your Breath--or even the Breath of your child--wouldn’t’ you do it? You give up your children to become monks, forcing them into a life of servitude. That’s seen as a sign of faith. Yet, when we do something to revere our Gods, you twist your lips at us and call us blasphemers.”

 Vivenna opened her mouth, but could come up with no response to that. Sending children away to become monks was different, of course. It didn’t require the stealing of Breath.

 “We sacrifice for our Gods,” Jewels said, still staring out the window. “Yes, it is a sacrifice. But that doesn’t mean we’re being exploited. My family was blessed because of what we did. Not only was there enough money to buy food, but my father recovered, and a few years later, he was able to open up the business again. My brothers still run it.

 “You don’t have to believe in my miracles, princess. You can call them coincidences, if you must. But don’t pity me for my faith. And don’t presume that you’re better, just because you believe something different.”

 Vivenna closed her mouth. Obviously, there was no point in arguing further. Jewels was in no mood to receive sympathy. So, Vivenna retreated back up the stairs, trying to convince herself that she wasn’t just running away because the argument had gone against her.

#

 A few hours later, the city began to grow dark. Vivenna stood on the house’s second-stroy balcony, looking out over the city. Most of the buildings on her street row had such balconies on the front of them. Ostentatious or not, they did provide a good view of T’Telir.

 The city glowed with light. On the larger streets, lamps lined the sidewalks, lit each night by city workers. Many of the buildings glowed as well. Such expenditure of oil and candles still amazed her. Yet, in Idris, the only oil they had came from the lowlands. Here, such things were much more economical.

 She didn’t know what to make of Jewels’ outburst. How could someone be proud that their Breath had been stolen from them as a child, then fed to a greedy Returned? It seemed ridiculous.

 Yet, Vivenna didn’t think that Jewels had been lying about her feelings. The woman’s tone, the way she’d spat out the words, seemed to indicate that she was being honest. She’d obviously thought about these things before. Had she, perhaps, had to rationalize them inside of her?

 Or, maybe, had she been forced to defend herself against Idrians before?

 Vivenna was caught. The Five Visions taught her to understand others and try to see their difficulties. They told her not to place herself above others. And yet, Austrism taught that what Jewels had done was an abomination.

 The two seemed contradictory. To believe that Jewels was wrong was to place herself above the woman. Yet, to accept what Jewels said was to deny Austrism. Perhaps another might have laughed at the turmoil inside of her, but she had always tried so hard to be devout. The monks had taught her that she’d need extra portions of faith if she were going to survive in the heathen Court of the Gods.

 Heathen. Wasn’t calling it heathen to place herself above? Yet, they were heathen. She couldn’t accept the Returned as true gods. It seemed that to believe in a faith was to become arrogant.

 Perhaps she deserved the things Jewels had said.

 Someone approached. Vivenna turned, surprised, as Denth pushed open the wooden door and stepped out onto the balcony.

 “We’re back,” he noted.

 “I know,” she said, looking out over the city and its specks of light. “I felt you enter the building a little while ago.”

 He paused, then laughed. “I sometimes forget you have so much Breath, princess. You never use it.”

 Except to feel when people are nearby, she thought. But, I can’t help that, can I? Should I not use that ability, because I refuse to Awaken things?

 “I recognize that look,” Denth noted. “A little frustrated? Still worried that things with the plan aren’t working fast enough?”

 She shook her head. “Other things entirely, Denth.”

 He chuckled. “Probably shouldn’t have left you alone so long with Jewels. I hope she didn’t take too many bites out of you.”

 Vivenna didn’t respond. Finally, she sighed, then turned toward him. “How did the job go?”

 “Perfectly,” Denth said. “By the time we hit the shop, nobody was looking. Considering the guards they put there every night, they must be feeling pretty stupid to have been robbed in the middle of the day.”

 “I still don’t understand what good it will do,” she said. “A spice merchant’s shop?”

 “Not his shop,” Denth said. “His storages. We either ruined or carted off every barrel of salt in that cellar. He’s one of only three men who store the spice in any great amount--most of the other spice merchants buy from one of the three.”

 “Yes, but salt,” Vivenna said. “What’s the point?”

 “How hot was it today?” Denth asked.

 Vivenna shrugged. “Too hot.”

 “What happens to meat when it’s hot?”

 “It rots,” Vivenna said. “But, they don’t have to use salt to preserve meat. They can use. . . .”

 “Cold?” Denth asked, chuckling. “No, not down here, princess. Not with this heat, year round. You want to preserve meat, you salt it. And if you want an army to carry fish with them from the inner sea to attack a place as far away as Idris. . . .”

 Vivenna smiled.

 “The thieves we worked with will ship the salt away,” Denth said. “Smuggle it to the distant kingdoms, where it can be sold openly. By the time this war comes, the crown will have some real trouble keeping its men supplied with meat. Another small strike, but enough of those should add up.”

 “Thank you,” Vivenna said.

 “Don’t thank us,” Denth said. “Just pay us.”

 Vivenna nodded. They fell silent for a time, watching out over the city.

 “Does Jewels really believe in the Iridescent Tones?” Vivenna finally asked.

 “As passionately as Tonk Fah likes to nap,” Denth said. He eyed her. “You didn’t challenge her on that, did you?”
 “Kind of.”

 Denth whistled. “And you’re still standing? I’ll have to thank her for her restraint.”

 “How can she believe?” Vivenna said.

 Denth shrugged. “Seems like a good enough religion to me. I mean, you can go and see her Gods. Talk to them, watch them shine. Isn’t all that tough to understand.”

 “But, she fights against them, kind of,” Vivenna said. “She’s working for an Idrian. Working to undermine her own Gods’ ability to wage war. That was a priest’s carriage we knocked over today.”

 “And a fairly important one, actually,” Denth said with a chuckle. “Ah, princess. It’s a little difficult to understand. Mindset of a mercenary. We’re paid to do things--but, in truth, we’re not the ones doing them. It’s you who do these things. We’re just your tools.”

 “Tools that work against the Hallandren Gods.”

 “That isn’t a reason to stop believing,” Denth said. “Or even a reason to turn down a job. At least, not in the eyes of a mercenary. You get pretty good at separating yourself and your beliefs from the things you have to do. Maybe that’s what makes people hate us so much. They can’t see that if we kill a friend on a battlefield, it doesn’t mean that we’re callous or untrustworthy. We do what we’re paid to do. Just like anyone else.”

 “It’s different,” Vivenna said.

 Denth shrugged. “Do you think that the metallurgist fears that the iron he purifies will end up making a sword that kills a friend of his?”

 Vivenna stared out over the lights of the city, with all of its people moving about. With all of their different beliefs, different ways of thinking, different contradictions inside of them. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one who found she had to try to believe two seemingly opposing things at the same time.

 “What about you, Denth?” she asked. “Are you Hallandren?”

 “Gods, no,” he said.

 “Then what do you believe.”

 “Haven’t believed much,” he said. “Not in a long time.”

 “What about your family?” Vivenna asked. “What did they believe?”

 “Family’s all dead. They followed things that most everybody has forgotten by now.”

 Vivenna frowned. “You have to believe in something. If not a religion, then somebody, or a way of living.”

 He shrugged. “I did, once.”

 “Do you always have to answer everything so vaguely?” she asked.

 He glanced at her. “Yes,” he said. “Except, perhaps, for that question.”

 She rolled her eyes.

 He leaned against the banister for a while longer. “The things I believed,” he finally said, “I don’t know that they’d make sense, or that you’d even listen to me if I told you about them.”

 “You claim to follow money,” she said. “But you don’t. I’ve seen Lemks’ ledgers. He wasn’t paying you that much. Not by far as much as I’d assumed. And, if you’d wanted, you could have hit that priest’s carriage and taken the money. You could have stolen it twice as easily as you did the salt.”

 He didn’t respond.

 “You don’t follow any kingdom or king I can figure out,” she continued. “You’re a better swordsman than any simple bodyguard--I suspect better than almost anyone, if you can impress a crime boss with your skill so easily as you did. You could have fame, students, and prizes if you decided to become a sport duelist.

 “You claim to listen to your employer,” she continued, “but it seems you give the orders more often than take them--and plus, since you don’t care about money, that whole employer thing is probably just a front.”

 She paused. “In fact,” she said, “the only thing I’ve ever seen you express even half an emotion about is that man. Vasher. The one with the sword.”

 Even as she said the name, Denth grew more tense.

 “Who are you?” she asked.

 He turned toward her, eyes hard, showing her--once again--that the jovial man he kept outside was something of a mask. A charade. A softness to cover the rock within.

 “I’m a mercenary,” he said.

 “All right,” she said, “then who were you?”

 “You don’t want to know the answer to that,” he said. And then, he left, stomping away through the door and leaving her alone on the dark wooden balcony.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Seven

 Lightsong awoke, snapping his eyes open, and climbed immediately from bed. He stood up, stretched, and smiled.

 “Beautiful day,” he said.

 His servants stood at the edges of the room, watching uncertainly.

 “What?” Lightsong asked, holding out his arms. “Come on, let’s get dressed.”

 At that, they rushed forward. Llarimar entered a few moments later. He lived outside the court, in the city. Lightsong often wondered how early he got up, since he was always there, dressed and ready, each morning when Lightsong rose.

 Llarimar watched him with a raised eyebrow. “You’re. . .chipper this morning, your grace.”

 Lightsong shrugged. “It just felt like it was time to get up.”

 “A full hour earlier than usual.”

 Lightsong cocked his head as the servants tied off his robes. “Really?”

 “Yes, your grace. Of course, you usually sleep around ten hours.”

 “Fancy that,” Lightsong said, nodding to his servants as they stepped back, leaving him dressed.

 “Shall we go over your dreams, then?” Llarimar asked.

 Lightsong paused, an image flashing in his head. Rain. Tempest. Storms. And a brilliant red panther.

 “Nope,” Lightsong said, walking toward the doorway.

 “Your grace. . . .”

 “We’ll talk about the dreams another time, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “We have other things to be about this day.

 “Other things?” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong smiled, reaching the doorway and turning back. “I want to go back to Mercystar’s palace.”

 Llarimar frowned. “Whatever for?”

 “I don’t know,” Lightsong said happily.

 Llarimar sighed. “Very well, your grace. But, can we at least look over some art, first? There are people who paid good money to get your opinion, and some are waiting quite eagerly to hear what you think of their pieces.”

 “All right,” Lightsong said. “But let’s be quick about it.”

#

 Lightsong stared at the painting.

 Red upon red, shades so subtle that the painter must have been of the First Heightening at least. Violent, terrible reds, clashing against each other like waves--waves that only vaguely resembled men, yet somehow managed to get across the idea of armies fighting much better than any detailed representation could have.

 Chaos. Bloody wounds upon bloody uniforms upon bloody skin. There was so much violence in that color. His own color. He almost felt as if he were in the painting--felt as if its turmoil were shaking him, disorienting him, pulling on him.

 The waves of men pointed toward one figure at the center. A woman, vaguely depicted by a body with too many curves, really more a couple of brush strokes than anything distinct. And yet, it was obvious. She stood high, as if atop a pile formed by crashing soldiers, in a posture of motion, head flung back, hand upraised.

 Carrying a deep black sword that darkened the red sky around it.

 “The battle of Twilight Falls,” Llarimar said quietly, standing beside him in the white hallway lined with paintings. “Last conflict of the Manywar.”

 Lightsong nodded. He’d known that, somehow. The faces of many of the soldiers were tinged with grey. Lifeless. The Manywar had marked the first time they had been used in large numbers on the battlefield. That had to do with some new processes in Awakening that allowed Lifeless to be created for far fewer Breaths than previous methods.

 “I know you don’t prefer war scenes,” Llarimar said. “But--”

 “I like it,” Lightsong said, cutting of the priest. “I like it a lot.”

 Llarimar fell silent.

 Lightsong looked back at the painting with its flowing reds, painted so subtly that they gave a feeling of war, rather than just an image. “It might be the best painting that has ever passed through my hall.”

 The priests on the other side of the room began writing furiously. Llarimar just stared at him, looking troubled.

 “What?” Lightsong asked.

 “It’s nothing,” Llarimar said.

 “Scoot. . . .” Llarimar said, eying him.

 The priest sighed. “I can’t speak, your grace. I cannot taint your impression of the paintings.”

 “A lot of Gods have been giving favorable reviews of war paintings lately, eh?” Lightsong said, looking back at the piece of art.

 Llarimar didn’t answer, but his silence seemed enough of a confirmation.

 “It’s probably nothing,” Lightsong said. “Just us responding to those arguments in the court, I’d guess.”

 “Likely,” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong fell silent. It wasn’t ‘nothing’, not to Llarimar. To him, Lightsong wasn’t just giving his impression of paint on a canvas--he was foretelling the future. And, what did it foretell to have him like a depiction of war with such vibrant, brutal colorings? Particularly since he’d often complained about war scenes in the past.

 I shouldn’t have spoken, he thought. And yet, as always, he had trouble lying about his impressions. Reading the art seemed like the only important thing he did, even if he didn’t agree with the interpretations and the soothsaying.

 He stared at the sharp smears of paint, each person a couple triangular brush strokes of color. It was beautiful. But, could war be beautiful? How could he find beauty in those grey faces meeting the flush ones, the Lifeless killing men? This battle hadn’t even meant anything. It hadn’t decided the fate of the war, even if the leader of the Pahn Unity--the kingdoms united against Hallandren--had been killed in the battle. Diplomacy and talk had finally ended the Manywar, not bloodshed.

 And I’m thinking of starting this up again, Lightsong thought, still transfixed by the beauty of the scene.

 No, he thought. No, I’m just being careful. Helping Blushweaver secure a political faction that controls the Lifeless in Hallandren. Better that, than let things just pass me by.

 The Manywar started because the Royal family wasn’t careful.

 The painting continued to call to him. “What’s that sword?” Lightsong asked.

 “Sword?”

 “The black one,” Lightsong said. “In the woman’s hand.”

 “I. . .I don’t see a sword, your grace,” Llarimar said. “To tell you the truth, I don’t see a woman, either. It’s all just wild strokes of paint, to me.”

 “You called it the Battle of Twilight Falls,” Lightsong said.
 “The title of the piece, your grace,” Llarimar said, troubled. “I assumed that you were as confused by it as I was, so I told you what the artist had named it.”

 The two fell silent. Finally, Lightsong turned, walking away from the painting. “I’m done reviewing art for the day,” he said.

 Llarimar offered no objection, though he did follow behind as Lightsong wove through a couple of colorful rooms, then finally out onto the courtyard lawn. As Lightsong walked, he tried to regain some of his earlier excitement, and he was mostly successful--though memory of the terrible, beautiful scene stayed with him. Mixing with his memories of the last night’s dream, the clashing tempest of winds that had been beating against him.

 Yet, not even that could dampen his mood completely. The truth was--odd dream notwithstanding--he had awoken more eager this day than he had in years. Something was different. Something excited him.

 There had been a murder in the Court of Gods.

 He didn’t know why he should find that so exciting. If anything, he should find it tragic. And yet, for so many years--as long as he lived--everything had been provided for him. Answers to his questions, entertainment to sate his whims. He had become a glutton out of necessity. Only two things had been withheld him: Knowledge of his past and the ability to leave the Court.

 Neither of those restrictions were going to change soon. But here, inside the court--the place of too much safety and comfort--something had gone wrong. A little thing. A thing most people would probably ignore.

 A thing that, therefore, they might let him play with. Nobody cared. Nobody wanted to care. Who, therefore, would mind Lightsong’s questions?

 “You’re acting very oddly, your grace,” Llarimar said, catching up to him as they crossed the grass, servants following behind in a chaotic cluster as they worked to get a parasol open to shade Lightsong from the sun.

 “I know,” Lightsong said. “However, can we not agree that I have always been rather odd, for a God?”

 “I guess that is true.”

 “Then, actually, I’m very much in line with myself,” Lightsong said. “And all is right in the universe.”

 “Are we really going back to Mercystar’s palace?”

 “Indeed we are. Do you suppose she’ll be annoyed at us? That might prove interesting.”

 Llarimar just sighed. “Are you ready to talk about your dreams yet?”

 Lightsong fell silent as he walked. The servants finally got the parasol up, and held it above him.

 “I dreamed of a storm,” Lightsong finally said. “I was standing in it, without anything to brace myself. It was raining and blowing against me, trying to force me backward. In fact, it was so strong that even the ground beneath me seemed to shake.”

 Llarimar frowned again.

 More signs of war, Lightsong thought with a sigh. Or, at least, that’s probably how he’ll see it.

 “Anything else?”

 “Yes,” Lightsong said. “A red panther. It seemed to shine, reflective, like it was made of glass or something like that. It was in the storm.”

 Llarimar eyed him. “Are you making things up, your grace?”

 “What? No! That’s what I really dreamed.”

 Llarimar sighed, but nodded to a lesser priest, who rushed up to do the transcribing.

 It wasn’t long before they reached Mercystar’s palace of yellow and gold. Lightsong paused before the building, realizing that he’d never paid a visit to another God’s palace without first sending a messenger or receiving one to invite him.

 “Do you want me to send someone in to announce you, your grace?” Llarimar asked.

 Lightsong stood for a moment. “No,” he finally said, noticing a pair of guards standing at one of the doorways. The two men looked far more muscular than the average servant, and they each carried a sword at their side. Dueling blades, Lightsong assumed--though he’d never actually seen one.

 He walked up to the men. “Is your mistress here?”

 “I am afraid not,” one of them said. “She went to visit Allmother for the afternoon.”

 “Ah,” Lightsong said. “Well, regardless, I need to inspect the corridor just inside here, where the attack happened the other night.”

 The guards glanced at each other. “I. . .don’t know if we can let you do that, your grace.”

 “Scoot!” Lightsong said, turning. “Can they forbid me?”

 “Only if they have direct commands forbiding you, given to them by Mercystar, your grace,” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong looked back at the men. Reluctantly, they stepped aside. “It’s perfectly all right,” he told the men. “She asked me to take care of things. Kind of. Coming, Scoot?”

 Llarimar followed him into the corridors. Once again, Lightsong felt an odd satisfaction. Instincts he didn’t know he had drove him to seek out the place where the servant had died.

 The wood had been replaced--his eyes, Heightened by his Breath--could easily tell the difference between the new wood and the old, used wood. He walked a little further. The patch where the wood had turned grey was gone as well, replaced with new wood.

 Interesting, he thought. But not unexpected, I guess. I wonder. . .are there any other patches.

 He walked forward a little further and was rewarded by another patch of new wood. It formed an exact square.

 “Your grace?” a new voice asked.

 Lightsong looked up to see the curt young priest he had spoken with the day before. Lightsong smiled. “Ah, good. I was hoping that you would arrive.”

 “This is most irregular, your grace,” the man said.

 “I know,” Lightsong said. “Look, I need to speak with the guards who saw the intruder the other night.”

 “But, why?” the priest said.

 “Because I’m eccentric,” Lightsong said. “Now send for them. I want all of the servants or guards who saw the man who committed the murder.”

 “Your grace,” the priest said sufferingly. “The authorities have already taken care of this. They have determined that the intruder was a thief after Mercystar’s art, and they have committed to--”

 “Scoot,” Lightsong said, turning. “Can this man ignore my demand?”

 “Only at great peril to his soul, your grace,” Llarimar said. “You are, after all, one of his Gods.”

 The priest eyed them both angrily, then turned and sent a servant to do as Lightsong asked. Lightsong turned away, kneeling on the wood, causing several servants to whisper in alarm. They obviously thought it improper for a God to stoop to the ground.

 Lightsong ignored them, looking at the square of new wood. It wasn’t like the other two that had been replaced. There, the boards had all been ripped up, creating an uneven patch of new color on the floor. Here, the distinction was very specific--a square patch of wood that was just slightly a different color from the others. Without his Breath--and a lot of it--he wouldn’t have even noticed the distinction.

 A trap door, he thought with sudden shock. The priest was watching him closely.

 Lightsong crawled along the floor, inspecting the rest of it, intentionally ignoring to the door in the wood. Once again, instincts he didn’t know he had warned him not to reveal what he’d discovered. So, instead, he looked as if he were searching for threads that might have been caught on the wood. He picked up one that had obviously come from a servant’s robe and held it up, pretending to inspect it.

 The priest seemed to relax slightly.

 So he knows about the trap door, Lightsong thought. And. . .perhaps the intruder did as well? The thief explanation was obviously a lie. It made very little sense for a man of at least several hundred Breaths to risk robbing a Returned just for a few pieces of art.

 Lightsong crawled about on the ground some more, causing great discomfort in the watching servants, until the men he had requested were assembled. Then, he stood--letting a couple of his servants rush forward and dust off his robes--and walked over to the newcomers. The hallway was growing quite crowded, so he shooed them back out into the sunlight.

 “Now,” he said, regarding the group of six men. “Identify yourselves. You on the left, who are you?”

 “My name is Gagaril,” the man said.

 “I’m sorry,” Lightsong said. “And, how are you involved?”

 “I was one of the guards at the door when the intruder broke in.”

 “Were you alone?” Lightsong asked.

 “No,” said another of the men. “I was with him.”

 “Good,” Lightsong said. “You two, go over there somewhere.” He waved his hand at the lawn. The men looked at each other, then walked away as indicated.

 “Far enough that you can’t hear us!” Lightsong called at them.

 The men nodded and continued.

 “All right,” Lightsong said, looking back at the others. “Who are you four?”

 “We were attacked by the man in the hallway,” one of the servants said. He pointed at two of the others. “All three of us. And. . .one other. The man who was killed.”

 “Terribly unfortunate, that,” Lightsong said, pointing at another section of the lawn. “Off you go. Walk until you can’t hear me any more, then wait.”

 The three men trudged off, looking confused.

 “And now you,” Lightsong said, hands on hips, regarding the last man--a shorter priest.

 “I saw him flee out the doors, your grace,” the priest said. “I was watching from the second story balcony.”

 “Very timely of you,” Lightsong said, pointing at a third spot on the lawn, far enough from the others to be sequestered. The man, recognizing the drill by now, walked away. Lightsong turned back to the priest who was obviously in charge.

 “You said that the intruder released a Lifeless animal?” Lightsong asked.

 “A squirrel, your grace,” the priest said. “We captured it.”

 “Go and fetch it for me.”

 “Your grace, it’s quite wild and--” He stopped, recognizing the look in Lightsong’s eyes. Then, he sighed, waving for a servant.

 “No,” Lightsong said. “Not a servant. You personally.”

 The priest looked incredulous.

 “Yes, yes,” Lightsong said, waving him away. “I know. You’re mortified. It’s an offense to your dignity. Perhaps you should think about converting to Austrism. For now, get going.”

 The priest left, grumping slightly to himself.

 “The rest of you,” Lightsong said, addressing his own servants and priests. “You wait here.”

 They looked resigned. Apparently, they were growing accustomed to him dismissing them.

 “Come on, Scoot,” Lightsong said, walking toward the first group he had sent off onto the lawn--the two guards. Llarimar scuttled forward to keep up as Lightsong took long strides over to the two men.

 “Now,” Lightsong said to them, out of earshot of the others, “tell me what you saw.”

 “He came to us pretending to be a madman, your grace,” one of the guards said. “He sauntered out of the shadows, mumbling to himself. It was just an act, though, and when he got close enough, he knocked us both out.”

 “How?” Lightsong asked.

 “He grabbed me around the neck with tassels from his Awakened coat,” one of the men said. He nodded to his companion. “Knocked him in the stomach with the hilt of a sword.”

 The second guard raised his shirt to show a large bruise on his stomach, then cocked his head to the side, showing another one on his neck.

 “Choked us both,” the first guard said. “Me with those tassels, Fran with a boot on his neck. That’s the last thing we knew. By the time we awoke, he was gone.”

 “He choked you,” Lightsong said, “but didn’t kill you. Just enough to knock you out?”

 “That’s right, your grace,” the guard said.

 “And, please describe this man,” Lightsong said.

 “He was big,” the guard said. “Had a scraggly beard. Not too long, but not trimmed either.”

 “He wasn’t smelly or dirty,” the other said. “He just didn’t seem to take much care for how he looked. His hair was long--came down to his neck--and hadn’t seen a brush in a long while.”

 “Wore ragged clothing,” the first said. “Patched in places, nothing bright, but not really dark either. Just kind of. . .bland.”

 “And he was armed?” Lightsong said.

 “With the sword that hit me,” the second guard said. “Big thing. Not a dueling blade, more like an easterner sword. Straight, but really long. Had it hidden under his cloak, and we would have seen it, if he hadn’t covered it up by walking so oddly.”

 Lightsong nodded. “Thank you. Stay here.”

 With that, he turned and walked toward the second group.

 “This is very interesting, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But I really don’t see the point.”

 “I’m just curious,” Lightsong said.

 “Excuse me, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But you’re not really the curious type.”

 Lightsong continued walking. The things he was doing, he did mostly without thinking. They just felt natural.

 They approached the next group. “You were the ones who saw the intruder in the hallway, right?” Lightsong said to them.

 The men nodded. One shot a glance back at Mercystar’s palace. The lawn in front of it was now crowded with a colorful assortment of priests and servants, both Mercystar’s and Lightsong’s own, who mulled about in confusion.

 “Tell me what happened,” Lightsong said, looking back at the three men.

 “We were walking through the servant’s hallway,” one said. “We’d been released for the evening, and were going to go out into the city to a local tavern.”

 “Then we saw someone in the hallway,” another said. “He didn’t belong there.”

 “Describe him,” Lightsong said.

 “Big man,” one said. The others nodded. “Had ragged clothing and a beard. Kind of dirty looking.”

 “No,” another said. “The clothing was old, but the man wasn’t dirty. Just a bit slovenly.”

 Lightsong nodded. “Continue.”

 “Well, there isn’t much to say,” one of the men said. “He attacked us. Threw an Awakened rope at poor Taff, who got tied up immediately. Rariv and I ran for help. Beblin stayed behind.”

 Lightsong looked at the third man. “You stayed back? Why?”

 “To help Taff, of course,” the man said.

 Lying, Lightsong thought. Looks too nervous. “Really?” he said, stepping closer.

 The man looked down. “Well, mostly. I mean, there was the sword, too. . . .”

 “Oh, right,” another said. “He threw a sword at us. Strangest thing.”

 “He didn’t draw it?” Lightsong asked.

 The men shook their heads. “He threw it at us, sheath and all. Beblin picked it up.”

 “I thought I’d fight him,” Beblin said.

 “Interesting,” Lightsong said. “So you two left?”

 “Yeah,” one of the men said, the other nodding. “When we came back with the others--after getting around that blasted squirrel--we found Bebid on the ground, unconscious, and poor Taff. . .well, he was still tied up, though the rope wasn’t Awakened any more. He’d been stabbed straight through.”

 “You saw him die?” Lightsong said of Bebid, the one who had stayed back. He had, Lightsong noticed, a bandage on one hand.

 “No,” the man said. “The intruder knocked me out with a fist to the head.”

 “But you had the sword,” Lightsong said.

 “It was too big to use,” the man said, looking down.

 “So, he threw the sword at you, then ran up and punched you?” Lightsong said.

 The man nodded.

 “And your hand?” Lightsong asked.

 The man paused, unconsciously retracting his hand. “It got twisted. Nothing important.”

 “And you need a bandage for a twisted wrist?” Lightsong said, raising an eyebrow. “Show me.”

 The man hesitated.

 “Show me, or lose your soul, child,” Lightsong said in what he hoped was a decently divine voice.

 The man slowly extended his hand. Llarimar stepped forward and removed the bandage.

 The hand was completely grey, drained of color.

 Impossible, Lightsong thought. Awakening. . .it doesn’t do that to living flesh. It can’t draw color from someone alive, only objects. Boards, clothing.

 The man withdrew his hand.

 “What is that?” Lightsong asked.

 “I don’t know,” the man said. “I woke up, and it was like that.”

 “Is that so?” Lightsong said flatly. “And I’m to believe that you had nothing else to do with this? That you weren’t working with the intruder, and helped cause your friend’s death?”

 The man fell to his knees suddenly, beginning to cry. “Please, my lord! Don’t take my soul. I’m not the best of men, I know. I go to the brothels. I cheat when we gamble.”

 The other two looked startled at this.

 “But I didn’t want poor Taff dead,” the kneeling Beblin continued. “Please, you have to believe me. I just wanted that sword. That beautiful, black sword! I wanted to draw it, swing it, attack the man with it. I reached for it, and while I was distracted, he attacked me. But, I didn’t see him kill Taff! I promise, I hadn’t ever seen this intruder before! You have to believe me!”

 Lightsong paused. “I do,” he finally said. “Let this be a warning or something. Be better. Stop cheating.”

 “Yes, my lord.”

 Lightsong nodded to the men, then he and Llarimar left them behind.

 “I actually kind of feel like a God,” Lightsong said. “Did you see me make that man repent?”

 “Amazing, your grace,” Llarimar said.

 “So, what do you think about their testimonies?” Lightsong said. “Something strange is going on, isn’t it?”

 “I’m still curious why you think you should be the one to investigate it, your grace,” Llarimar said.

 “Who better?” Lightsong said. “It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

 “Besides be a God.”

 “Overrated,” Lightsong said, walking up to the final man. “It has a few nice perks, but the hours are awful.”

 Llarimar snorted quietly as Lightsong turned to address the final witness, the short priest who stood in his robes of yellow and gold. He looked rather uncertain, and was a fair bit younger than the other priest.

 Was he chosen to tell me lies with the hopes that he’d seem innocent? Lightsong wondered idly. Or, am I just making assumptions?

 “What is your story?” Lightsong asked.

 The young priest bowed slightly. “I was going about my duties, carrying several inscribed prophesies from the Lady’s mouth to the records sanctuary. At that point, your grace, I heard a distant ruckus in the building. I looked out the window, toward the sound, but I saw nothing.”

 “Where were you?” Lightsong asked.

 The young man pointed toward a window. “There, your grace.”

 Lightsong frowned. The man wouldn’t have been able to see anything--he’d been on the opposite side of the palace from the hallway where the killing had occurred. However, that was the side of the building where the intruder had first entered.

 “You could see the place where the intruder disabled the two guards?” Lightsong asked.

 “Yes, your grace,” the man said. “Though, I didn’t see the guards on the ground at first. I almost left the window behind to go search out the sounds. However, at that point I did notice something odd in the lantern light of the entryway. A figure was moving about. It was then that I saw the forms of the two guards on the ground. I thought they were bodies, an I was frightened by the shadowy figure moving between them. I screamed, and ran for help. By the time anyone paid attention to me, however, the figure was gone.”

 “You went down to look for him?” Lightsong asked.

 The man nodded.

 “And how long did it take you?”

 “Several minutes, your grace.”

 Lightsong nodded slowly. “Very well, then. Thank you.”

 The young priest nodded, moving as if to walk over to the main group.

 “Oh, wait,” Lightsong said. “Did you, by chance, get a good enough look at the intruder?”

 “Not really, your grace,” the priest said. “He was in dark clothing, kind of nondescript. It was too far away to see well.”

 Lightsong nodded to himself, waving the man away. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then eyed Llarimar. “Well?” he asked.

 The priest raised an eyebrow. “Well what, your grace?”

 “What do you think?”

 Llarimar shook his head. “I. . .honestly don’t know, your grace. This is obviously important, however.”

 Lightsong paused. “It is?”

 Llarimar nodded. “Yes, your grace. Because of what that man said--the one who was wounded in the hand. He mentioned a black sword--you predicted it, remember? In the painting this morning?”

 “That wasn’t a prediction,” Lightsong said. “That was really there, in the painting.”

 “That’s the way foretelling works, your grace,” Llarimar said. “Don’t you see? You look at a painting, and an entire image appears to your eyes. All I see is random strokes of a red brush. The scene you describe--the things you see--are prophetic. You are a God.”
 “But, I saw exactly what the painting was said to depict!” Lightsong said. “Before you even told me what the title was!”

 Llarimar nodded knowingly, as if that proved his point.

 “Oh, never mind. Priests. Insufferable fanatics, every one of you. Either way, you agree with me that there is something strange here.”

 “Definitely, your grace.”

 “Good,” Lightsong said. “Then you’ll kindly stop complaining when I investigate it.”

 “Actually, your grace,” Llarimar said, “it’s even more imperative that you not get involved. You predicted this would occur, but you are an oracle. It is your job to see, but not to change. If you get involved in this, you could unbalance a great many things.”

 “I always like being unbalanced,” Lightsong said. “Besides, this is far too much fun.”

 As usual, Llarimar didn’t react to having his advice ignored. As they began to walk back toward the main group, however, the priest did ask a question.

 “Your grace. Just to sate my own curiosity, what do you think about the murder?”
 “It’s obvious,” Lightsong said idly. “There were two intruders. The first is the large man mentioned--he knocked out the guards, attacked those servants, released the Lifeless, then disappeared into the palace structure. The second man--the one the young priest saw--came in after the first intruder. This second man is the murderer.”

 Llarimar frowned. “Why do you suppose that?”
 “The first man took care not to kill,” Lightsong said. “He knocked out the guards, but didn’t strangle them enough to kill them. He left them alive, presumably capable of waking back up at any moment to raise the alarm. He didn’t draw his sword against the servants, but simply tried to subdue them. There was no reason for him to kill a tied up captive--particularly since he’d already left witnesses who had seen him. It wouldn’t make sense.

 “If there were a second man, however. . .someone following the first. . .well, that would make sense. The man who died, he was the one who was conscious when this second intruder came in. The only one who saw the second intruder.”

 “So, you think someone else followed the man with the sword, killed the only witness, and then. . . .”

 “Both of them disappeared somewhere,” Lightsong said. “I’m thinking a trapdoor to a place beneath the palace. Seems fairly obvious to me. One thing, however, is not obvious.”

 He glanced at Llarimar, slowing before they reached the main group of priests and servants.

 “And. . .what is that, your grace?” Llarimar asked.

 “How in the name of the Colors I figured all of this out.”

 “I’m trying to decide that myself, your grace,” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong shook his head. “This comes from before, Scoot. Everything I’m doing, it feels natural. Who was I, before I died?”

 “I don’t know what you mean, your grace,” Llarimar said, turning away.

 “Oh, come now, Scoot. We both know I’m an idiot, and this seems obvious to even me. I spend most of my Returned life lounging about, avoiding any kind of activity. And then, the moment someone is killed, I leap up and can’t help but start poking around? Doesn’t that sound a little suspicious to you?”

 Llarimar didn’t look at him.

 “Colors!” Lightsong swore. “You mean to tell me I was someone useful? I was just beginning to convince myself that I’d died in a reasonable way--such as falling off a stump when I was drunk.”

 “I said nothing,” Llarimar said.

 “Well, these instincts came from somewhere,” Lightsong said as they walked up to the group. The head priest from before stood with a wooden box. Wild scratching came from inside.

 “Thank you,” Lightsong snapped, grabbing the box and passing by without even breaking stride. “I’m telling you, Scoot, I am not pleased.”

 “You seemed rather happy this morning, your grace,” Llarimar noted as they walked away from Mercystar’s palace. Her priest stood behind, a complaint dying on his lips, Lightsong’s entorage leaving him behind.

 “I was happy,” Lightsong said, “because I didn’t know what was going on. How am I going to be properly indolent if I keep itching to go solve things or figure out problems? Honestly, this murder is completely destroying my hard-earned reputation.”

 “I’m sorry, your grace, that you have to be inconvenienced by a semblance of motivation.”

 “You should be,” Lightsong said, sighing. He handed over the box with its furious Lifeless rodent. “Here. You think my Awakeners can break its codes?”

 “Probably,” Llarimar said. “Though, it’s an animal, your grace. It won’t be able to tell us information.”

 “Have them do it anyway,” Lightsong said. “I need to think about this case some more.”

 They walked back to his palace. However, the thing that struck Lightsong the most was the fact that he’d used the word ‘case’ in reference to the murder. It was a word he’d never heard used in that particular context. Yet, he knew that it fit. Instinctively, automatically.

 I didn’t have to learn to speak again when I Returned, he thought. I didn’t have to learn to walk again, or read again, or anything like that. Only my memory was lost.

 But not all of it, apparently.

 And that left him wondering what else he could do, if he tried.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Eight

 Something happened to those previous emperors, Siri thought, walking through the near-endless rooms of the God King’s palace, her servants scuttling behind. Something that Bluefingers fears will happen to Susebron. It will be dangerous, to both the God King and myself.

 Though, she only had Bluefingers’ word. She continued to walk, trailing a train made from hundred tassels of translucent green silk behind her. The day’s gown was nearly gossamer--she’d chosen it with a blush, then had asked her servants to fetch an opaque slip for her. It was still ostentatious.

 She’d pretty much stopped caring about that kind of thing. There were much more important problems that she needed to worry about.

 The priests do fear that something will happen to Susebron, she thought firmly. They are so eager for me to produce an heir. They claim it’s about the succession, but they went fifty years without caring. They were willing to wait twenty years to get their bride from Idris. Whatever the danger is, it’s not urgent.

 And yet, the priests act like it is.

 Why would they wait? Perhaps they’d wanted a bride of the Royal line so badly that they’d been willing to risk the danger long enough for a daughter to grow up. Surely they needn’t have waited twenty years, though. Vivenna could have born children years ago.

 Though. . .perhaps the treaty specified a time, and not an age. Maybe it just said that the king of Idris had twenty years to provide a bride for the God King. That would explain why her father had been able to send Siri instead. Gritting her teeth, Siri cursed herself for ignoring her lessons about the treaty. She didn’t really know what it said. For all she knew, the danger could be spelled out in the document itself.

 She needed more information. Unfortunately, the priests were indifferent, the servants silent, and Bluefingers, well, he was proving difficult.

 The thought occurred to her just as she finally caught sight of him walking through one of the rooms, writing on his ledger. Siri hurried up, her train rustling. She’d been asking all over the palace, searching for him, if she could just. . . .

 He turned, glimpsing her. His eyes opened wide, and he scuttled away with increased speed, ducking through the open doorway into another room. Siri called after him, moving as quickly as the dress would allow. However, when she arrived, the room was empty.

 “Colors!” she swore, feeling her hair grow a deep red in annoyance. “You still think he isn’t avoiding me?” she demanded, turning to the leader of her servants.

 The woman lowered her gazed. “It would be improper for a servant of the palace to avoid his queen, Vessel. He must not have seen you.”

 Right, Siri thought, just like every other time. She’d sent for him, and he’d always conveniently arrived after she’d left. She’d had a letter scribed to him, and he’d responded with such vague language as to frustrate her even further.

 She couldn’t take books from the palace library, and the priests were disruptively distracting if she tried to read inside the library chamber itself. She’d requested books from the city, but the priests had insisted that they be brought by a priest, then read to her, as to not “strain her eyes.” She was pretty sure that if there was anything in the book that the priests didn’t want her to know, the reader would simply skip it.

 She might have to risk it, since she couldn’t leave the Court of Gods. She depended so much upon the priests and scribes for everything, including information.

 Except. . . . she thought, still standing in the bright red room. There was another source of information. One she hadn’t really tested yet.

 She turned to her servant leader. “What activities are going on today in the courtyard?”
 “Many, Vessel,” the woman said, still looking downward. “Some artists have come, and are doing paintings and sketches. There are some animal handlers showing exotic pets, several dye merchants displaying some of their newest color combinations, and--of course--there are minstrels.”

 Siri frowned to herself. Seemed busy. “What about at that building we went to before?”

 “The arena, Vessel? I believe there will be games there later in the evening. Contests of physical prowess.”

 Siri nodded. “Prepare a box. I want to attend.”

#

 Back in her homeland, Siri had occasionally watched running contests. They were usually spontaneous, as the monks did not approve of men showing off their speed. Austre gave all men talents. Flaunting them was seen as arrogance.

 Still, boys cannot be so easily contained. She had seen them run, andhad even encouraged them. Those contests, however, had been nothing like what the Hallandren men now displayed.

 There were a half dozen different events going on at once. Some men threw large stones, competing for distance. Others raced in a wide circle around the interior of the arena floor, kicking up sand, sweating heavily in the muggy Hallandren heat. Others tossed javelins, shot arrows, or engaged in jumping contests.

 Siri watched with a deepening blush--one that ran all the way to the ends of her hair. The men wore only loincloths. During her weeks in the grand city, she had never seen anything quite so. . .interesting.

 A lady shouldn’t stare at young men, her mother had taught. It’s unseemly.

 Yet, what was the point, if not to stare? Siri couldn’t help herself. And, it wasn’t just because of the naked skin. The greater part of her interest was due to the simple beauty of the contests. These were men who had trained extensively to compete--who had mastered their pysical abilites to wonderous results. As Siri watched, she saw that relatively little regard was given to the winners of each particular event. The contests weren’t about victory, but about the skill required to even compete.

 In that way, these contests were almost in line with Idris sensibilities--yet, at the same time, they were ironically opposite.

 The beauty of the games kept her distracted for much longer than she’d intended, her hair permanently locked into a deep maroon blush, even after she got used to the idea of men competing in such scant clothing. Eventually, however, she forced herself to stand and turn away from the performance. She had work to do.

 Her servants perked up, moving forward to see to her needs. They had brought all kinds of luxuries to comfort her. Full couches and cushions, fruits and wines, even a few men with fans to keep her cool. The strange thing was, even after only a few weeks in the palace, such comfort was beginning to seem commonplace to her.

 “There was a God who came and spoke to me before,” Siri said, scanning the amphitheater, where many of the stone box sections were decorated with colorful pavilions. “Which one was it?”

 “Lightsong the Bold, Vessel,” one of the serving women said. “God of bravery.”

 Siri nodded. “And his colors are?”

 “Gold and red, Vessel.”

 Siri smiled. It was one of the colors represented in the arena. He wasn’t the only God to have introduced himself to her during her weeks in the palace, but he was the only one who had spent any amount of time chatting with her. He’d been confusing, she remembered, but at least he’d been willing to talk openly.

 She left her box, beautiful dress trailing along the ston. She’d had to force herself to stop feeling guilty for ruining them, since apparently each dress was burned the day after she wore it.

 Her leaving provoked quite a response. Her servants burst into anxious motion, gathering up furniture and foods, following behind.

 Siri trailed along the stone walkway. As before, there were people on the benches below--merchants rich enough to buy entrance to the Court, or peasants who had won a certain lottery drawing. Many turned and looked up as she passed, whispering among themselves.

 It’s the only way they get to see me, she realized. Their queen.

 That was one thing that Idris certainly did better than Hallandren. The Idrians had easy access to their king and their government, while in Hallandren the leaders were held aloof--and therefore made remote, even mysterious.

 She frowned at that thought as she approached the red and gold pavilion. The God she had seen before lounged inside, relaxing on a couch, sipping a large glass cup filled with an icy red liquid. He looked much as he had before--chiseled masculine features that she was coming to associate with Godhood, styled black hair, golden tan skin, and a rather indifferent attitude.

 That’s something else Idris was right about, she thought. My people may be too stern, but it also isn’t good to become as indulgent as some of these Returned.

 The God, Lightsong, eyed her. “My queen,” he finally said.

 “Lightsong the Bold,” she said as one of her servants brought her chair. “I trust your day has been pleasant?”

 “So far this day I have discovered several disturbing and redefining elements of my soul which are slowly restructuring the very nature of my existence.” He took a sip from his drink. “Other than that, it was uneventful. You?”

 “Fewer revelations,” Siri said, sitting. “More confusion. I’m still rather inexperienced in the way things work here. I was kind of hoping you could answer some of my questions, give me some information, perhaps. . . .”

 “Afraid not,” Lightsong said happily.

 Siri paused, then flushed, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong. I--”

 “No, nothing wrong, child,” Lightsong said, his smile deepening. “The reason I cannot help you is because I, unfortunately, know absolutely nothing. I’m useless. Haven’t you heard?”

 “Um. . .I’m afraid I haven’t.”

 “You should pay better attention,” he said, raising his cup toward her. “Shame on you.”

 Siri frowned, growing more embarrassed. Lightsong’s high priest--distinguished by his oversized headgear--looked on disapprovingly, and that only caused her to be more self-conscious.

 Why should I be the self-conscious one? she thought, growing annoyed. Lightsong is the one who is making veiled insults against me, while making overt ones against himself. It’s like he enjoys being degraded.

 “Actually,” Siri said, looking over at him, lifting her chin. “I have heard of your reputation, Lightsong the Bold. Useless wasn’t the word I heard referring to you, however.”

 “Oh?” he said.

 “Yes. I was told you were harmless, though I can see that is not true--for in speaking to you, my ears have certainly been harmed. Not to mention my head, which is beginning to ache.”

 “Both common symptoms of dealing with me, I’m afraid,” he said with an exaggerated sigh.

 “That could be solved,” Siri said. “Perhaps it would help if you put a bag over your head and refrained from speaking when others are around. I think I should find you quite amiable in those circumstances.”

 Lightsong laughed. Not a bellowing laugh, like her father or some of the men back in Idris, but a more refined laugh. Still, it seemed genuine.

 “I knew I liked you, girl,” he said.

 “I’m not sure if I should find that an insult or not.”

 “Depends upon how seriously you take yourself,” Lightsong said. “Come, divest yourself of that silly chair and recline on one of these couches. Enjoy yourself.”

 “I’m not sure that would be proper,” Siri said.

 “I’m a God,” Lightsong said with a wave of his hand. “I make propriety.”

 “I think I’ll sit anyway,” Siri said, though she did stand and have her servants bring the chair further under the pavilion, so that she didn’t have to speak so loudly. She was careful not to look to long at the contests, lest she be drawn in by them again.

 Lightsong smiled. He seemed to enjoy making others uncomfortable. But, then, he also seemed to take little concern for how he was regarded. Either way, he seemed to have accepted her presence in his pavilion.

 “I was honest before, Lightsong,” she said. “I need information.”

 “And I, my dear, was quite honest when I said I was useless. However, I’ll try my best to answer your questions--assuming, of course, you can provide answers to mine.”

 “And. . .if I don’t know the answers to your questions?” she said.

 “Then make something up,” he said. “I’ll never know the difference. Unaware ignorance is far more comfortable than knowledgeable stupidity.”

 “I’ll try to remember that.”

 “Do so, and you defeat the point. Now, your questions?”

 “What happened to the previous God Kings?” she asked.

 “Died,” Lightsong said. “Happens to people sometimes. Even Gods. We make, if you haven’t noticed, rather poor immortals. We keep forgetting about that ‘live forever’ part, and instead find ourselves unexpectedly dead. For the second time. Rather unpleasant, so I hear.”

 “Dead?” she said. “How did the God Kings die?”

 “Gave away their Breath,” Lightsong said. “Isn’t that right, Scoot?”

 Lightsong’s high priest nodded. “It is, your grace. His Divine Majesty Susebron the Fourth died to cure the plague of distrentia that struck T’Telir some fifty years ago.”

 “Wait,” Lightsong said. “Isn’t distrentia a disease of the bowels?”

 “Indeed,” the high priest said.

 Lightsong frowned. “You mean to tell me that our God King--the most holy and divine personage in our pantheon--died to cure a few tummy aches?”

 “I wouldn’t exactly put it that way, your grace.”

 Lightsong leaned over to Siri. “I’m expected to do that someday, you know. Kill myself so that some old lady will be able to stop messing herself in public. Terribly undignified, if you ask me. No wonder I’m such an embarrassing God. Must have to do with subconscious self-worth issues.”

 The high priest shot an apologetic look at Siri. For the first time since she’d entered the pavilion, she realized that the overweight priest’s disapproval wasn’t directed at her, but his God. To her, he smiled.

 Maybe they’re not all like Tridees, she thought, smiling back.

 “The God King’s sacrifice was not a frivolous waste, Vessel,” the priest said. “True, diarrhea may not seem a danger to many, but to the elderly and the young, it can be quite deadly. Plus, the conditions were spreading other diseases, and the city’s commerce--and therefore the kingdom’s commerce--had slowed to a crawl. People in outlying villages went months without necessary supplies.”

 Siri nodded.

 “Well, there you go,” Lightsong said. “Question answered. I’m sorry.”

 “Why?”

 “Because I lied to you,” Lightsong said.

 Siri paused. “About how the God King died?”

 “Colors, no. About being useless. I promise, I will be more diligent in the future.”

 Siri paused, then found herself smiling even more deeply.

 “What?” Lightsong asked, then finished off the last of his drink. It was immediately replaced by another one, this time blue.

 “Talking to you is like talking to a river,” she said. “I keep getting pulled along with the current, and I’m never sure when I’m going to be able to take another breath.”

 “Watch out for the rocks, Vessel,” the high priest noted. “They look rather innocent, but there’s a lot of weight to them, under the surface.”

 “Bah,” Lightsong said. “It’s the alligators you have to watch for. They can bite. And. . .what exactly are we talking about, anyway?”

 “The God Kings,” Siri said. “When the last one died, an heir had already been produced?”

 “Indeed,” the high priest said. “In fact, he had just been married the year before, the child being born to him only weeks before he died.”

 Siri sat back in her chair, thoughtful. “And the God King before him?”

 “Died to heal the children of a village, attacked by bandits,” Lightsong said. “The commoners love that story. The king was so moved by their suffering that he gave himself up for the simple people.”

 “And, had he been married the year before?” Siri asked.

 “No, Vessel,” the high priest said. “It was several years afterward. Though, he did die only a month after his second child was born.”

 Siri looked up. “Was the first child a daughter?”

 “Yes,” the priest said. “A woman of no divine or Returned powers. How did you know?”

 Colors! Siri thought. Both times, right after the heir was born.

 Did having a child somehow make the God Kings wish to give their lives away? Did it change them, somehow, and make them meloncholy? Or, was it something more sinister? A cured plague or healed village were both things that, with a little creative propaganda, could be invented.

 “I’m not much of an expert on these things, I’m afraid, Vessel,” the high priest continued. “And, I’m afrid that Lord Lightsong does not either. If you press him, he could very well just begin making things up.”

 “Scoot!” Lightsong said indignantly. “That’s slanderous. Oh, and by the way, your zebra is on fire.”

 “Thank you,” Siri said. “Both of you. It has actually been rather helpful.”

 “If I might suggest. . . .” the high priest said.

 “Of course,” she replied.

 “Try a professional storyteller, Vessel,” the priest said. “You can order one in from the city, and they can recite both histories and tales of imagination to you. They will provide much better information than we can.”

 Siri nodded. Why can’t the priests in the palace be this helpful?

 Of course, if they really were covering up the reason why their God Kings died, then they had good reason to av oid helping her. In fact, there was a good chance that if she asked for a storyteller, they would just send for one who would tell her what they wanted her to hear.

 She frowned. “Could. . .you do it for me, Lightsong?”

 “What?”

 “Order in a storyteller,” she said. “I should like you two to be there, in case I have any questions.”

 Lightsong shrugged. “I guess I could. Haven’t heard a storyteller in some time. Just let me know when.”

 Siri nodded. It wasn’t a perfect plan. Her servants were listening to the exchange, and they might be spies for the priests. However, if the storyteller came to Lightsong’s palace, perhaps there was a better chance of Siri hearing the truth.

 “Thank you,” she said, rising.

 “Ah, ah, ah?” Lightsong said, raising a finger.

 She paused.

 He drank from his cup.

 “Well?” she finally asked.

 He held up the finger again as he continued to drink, tipping his head back, getting the last bits of slushy ice from the bottom of the cup. Then, he set it aside, mouth blue. “How refreshing. Idris. Wonderful place. Lots of ice. Costs quite a bit, so I’ve heard. Good thing I don’t ever have to pay for anything, eh?”

 Siri raised an eyebrow. “And I’m standing here waiting because. . . .”

 “You promised to answer some of my questions.”

 “Oh,” she said, sitting back down. “Of course.”

 “Now, then,” he said. “Did you know any policemen back in your home village?”

 She cocked her head. “Police men?”

 “You know, fellows who keep the law. City watch. Law enforcement officers. Sheriffs. The men who catch crooks and guard dungeons. That sort.”

 “I. . .I knew a couple, I guess,” she said. “My home city wasn’t large, but it was the capital, so it did attract some difficult people.”

 “Ah, good,” Lightsong said. “Kindly describe them for me. Not the difficult fellows, of course. The city watch.”

 Siri shrugged. “I don’t know. They tended to be careful. They’d interview newcomers to the village, walk the streets looking for wrongdoing, that sort of thing.”

 “Would you call them inquisitive types?”

 “Yes,” Siri said. “I guess. I mean, as much as anybody. Maybe more.”

 “Were there ever any murders in your village?”

 “A couple,” Siri said, glancing down. “There shouldn’t have been--my father always said things like that shouldn’t happen in Idris. Said murder was a thing of. . .well, Hallandren.”

 Lightsong chuckled. “Yes, we do it all the time. Quite the party trick. Now, did these policemen investigate the murders?”

 “Of course.”

 “Without having to be asked to do so?”

 Siri nodded.

 “How’d they go about it?”

 “I don’t know,” Siri said, frowning in confusion. “They asked about, talked to witnesses, looked for clues. I wasn’t involved.”

 “No, no,” Lightsong said. “Of course you weren’t. If you’d been a murderer, they would have done something terrible to you. Like. . .I don’t know, exile you to another country?”

 Siri felt herself pale, hair growing lighter.

 Lightsong just laughed. “Oh, don’t go taking me seriously, child. Honestly, I got past thinking you were an assassin ages ago. Now, if your servants and mine will stay behind for a second, I think I have something important to tell you.”

 Siri started, watching as Lightsong stood up. He began to walk from the pavilion, and his servants remained back. Confused but excited, Siri rose from her own seat and hurried after him, waving her servants back. She caught up with him a short distance away, on the stone walkway that ran between the various boxes in the arena. Down below, the athletes continued their display.

 Lightsong looked down at her, smiling.

 They really are tall, she thought, craning a bit. A single foot of extra height made such a difference; when standing next to a man like Lightsong--and not really being that tall in the first place--she felt dwarfed.

 Maybe this is what I’ve been looking for, Siri thought. The secret!

 “You are playing a dangerous game, my queen,” Lightsong said, leaning against the stone railing. It was built after Returned proportions, so it was too high for her to rest against comfortably.

 “Game?” she asked.

 “Politics,” he said, watching the athletes.

 “I don’t want to play politics.”

 “That’s what I always say,” Lightsong said, sighing. “But, I keep getting sucked in. Every time. Complaining really doesn’t do much good--though it does annoy people, which is satisfying in its own right.”

 Siri frowned. “So, you pulled me aside to give me a warning?”

 “Colors, no,” Lightsong said, chuckling. “If you haven’t figured out that this is dangerous, then you’re far to dense to worry about warning.”

 “Oh. Well, that’s pleasant. Do you have more insults for me, or should I slap you now?”

 He smiled, obviously noting the sarcasm in her voice. “I just wanted to give some advice. The first is about your persona.”

 “My persona?”

 “Yes,” he said. “It needs work. Using the persona of an innocent newcomer was a good instinct. You fit it well. But, you need to refine it. Work on it.”

 “It’s not a persona,” she said honestly. “I am confused and new to all this.”

 Lightsong raised a finger. “That’s the trick to politics, child. Sometimes, you can’t disguise who you are and how you feel. But, you can still control how people react to you. Take who you are and adapt it. Become it. You want to know how people regard you, because that way you know how they’ll react to you.”

 Siri frowned.

 “Take me as an exaple,” Lightsong said. “I’m a useless fool. Always have been, as long as I can remember--which, actually, isn’t all that long. I call you child, but I’m the real child. Only been alive five years, though I feel as if I’ve lived forty. Either way, I know how people regard me. So, I enhance it. Play with it.”

 “So, it’s a lie?”

 “Of course not. This is who I am. However, I make certain that people know it. Controlling how you look--how people think of you--is paramount, my queen. My suggestion is to make that persona true to yourself, but don’t make it all of yourself.

 “Let them see you, let them become comfortable with who you are. People distrust that which they can’t predict. As long as you feel like a random element in court, you will appear to be a threat. However, if you can skillfully--and honestly--portray yourself as someone they understand, then you’ll begin to fit into this all.

 “You can’t control everything. But you can find a place in this mess. And, once you have it, you can begin to push things about a bit. Should you want to. I rarely do, because it’s such a hassle.”

 Siri cocked her head. Then, she smiled. “You’re a good man, Lightsong,” she said. “I knew it, even when you were insulting me. You mean no harm. Is that part of your persona?”

 “Trust me,” he said, smiling. “I’m not sure what it is about me that convinces people to trust me. I’d get rid of the if I could. It only serves to make people expect too much from me.

 “Anyway, give what I said some practice. Do a better job than I have, hopefully. The best thing about being locked in this beautiful prison is that you can do some good, you can change things, should you choose. I’ve seen others do it. People I respected. Haven’t been many of those around in the Court lately.”

 “All right,” she said slowly.

 “Good,” he said. “You’re digging for something--I can sense it. And it has to do with the priests. Don’t make too many waves until you’re ready to strike. Sudden and surprising, that’s how you want to do things. You don’t want to appear too nonthreatening--people are always suspicious of those who seem innocent. The trick is to appear average. Just as crafty as everyone else. That way, everyone else will assume that they can beat you with just a little advantage.”

 Siri nodded. “Kind of an Idris philosophy.”

 “You came from us,” Lightsong said. “Or, perhaps, we came from you. Either way, we’re more similar than a lot of our outward trappings make us seem. I mean, what is that Idris philosophy of extreme plainness except a means of contrasting against Hallandren? All those whites you people are supposed to use? That makes you stand out on a national scale. You act like us, we act like you, we just do things in opposite ways.”

 She nodded slowly.

 He smiled, standing. “Oh, and one thing. Please, please don’t depend on me too much. I mean what I say. I’m not going to be of much help. If your plots come to a head, and things go wrong at the last moment, and you’re in danger or distress, don’t think of me. I will fail you. That, I promise with the absolute sincerity of my heart.”

 “You’re a very strange man.”

 “Product of my society,” he said, smiling. “And, since my society consists pretty much only of myself, I blame God. Good day, my queen.”

 With that, he trailed away, walking back to his pavilion, waving for her servants--who had been watching with concern--to finally rejoin her.

Warbreaker

Chapter Twenty-Nine

 “The meeting is set, my lady,” Thame said. “The men are eager. Your work in T’Telir is gaining more and more notoriety.”

 Vivenna wasn’t sure what she thought of that. She sipped her juice. The lukewarm liquid was addictively flavorful.

 Thame looked at her eagerly. The short Idris man was, by Denth’s investigations, trustworthy enough. His story of being ‘forced’ into a life of crime was a bit exaggerated. He filled a niche in Hallandren society--he acted as a liaison between the Idris workers and the various criminal elements. He knew both societies, and that gave him some value.

 He was also, apparently, a staunch patriot. Despite the fact that he tended to exploit his own people, particularly newcomers to the city.

 “How many will be at the meeting?” Vivenna asked, watching traffic pass on the street out beyond the restaurant patio gate.

 “Over a hundred, my lady,” Thame said. “Loyal to our king, I promise. And, they’re influential men, all of them--for Idrians, that is.”

 Which, according to Denth, meant that they were men who wielded power in the city because they could provide cheap Idrian workers. Could also sway the opinion of the underprivileged Idrian masses. Make them more compliant. Or, raise them to mischief, should the occasion warrant.

 They were men who, like Thame, thrived because of the Idrian subclass within the city. A strange duality. These men gained notoriety among an oppressed minority, and therefore became a force unto themselves. Without the oppression, Thame and the bosses would be powerless. And yet, they claimed to want the best for their people.

 Like Lemks, she thought, who served my father--even seemed to respect and love him--all the while stealing every bit of gold he could get his fingers on.

 She leaned back, wearing a white dress with a long skirt that rippled and blew in the wind. She tapped the side of her cup, nodding as a serving man approached and refilled her juice. Thame smiled, taking more juice as well, though he looked a little out of place in the fine restaurant.

 “How many are there, you suppose?” she asked. “Idrians in the city, I mean.”

 “Several thousand at least, my lady. Perhaps as many as five or six.”

 “That high a number?”

 “Trouble on the lower farms,” Thame said, shrugging. “It’s hard, sometimes, living up in those mountains. Crops fail, and what do you have? The king owns your land, so you can’t sell. You need to pay your levies. . . .”

 “Yes, but men can make petitions in the case of disaster,” Vivenna said, frowning.

 “Ah, my lady, but most of these men are several weeks travel from the king. If you’re one of them, what do you do? Do you leave your family and seek a petition, yet fear that they’ll starve during the weeks it will take to bring food from the king’s storehouse? Or, do you travel the much shorter distance down to T’Telir? Take work there, loading on the docks or harvesting flowers in the jungle plantations. Hard work, but steady.”

 Vivenna frowned to herself. And, in doing so, they betray their people.

 But, who was she to judge? The Fifth Vision chastised her haughtiness. She sat beneath a shaded canopy, enjoying a nice breeze and expensive juice while other men slaved to provide for their families. She had no right to sneer at their motivations.

 Yet, something had gone wrong. Idrians shouldn’t have to seek for work in Hallandren. She didn’t like to admit fault in her father, for she thought him to be a good king. Yet, his was not a bureaucratically strong kingdom. It consisted of dozens of villages, spread out all over the highlands, with poor roadways that were often hampered by snows or rockslides. In addition, he had to expend a lot of resources keeping his military strong in case of a Hallandren assault.

 He had a difficult job. Yet, was that a good enough excuse for the poverty she saw in her people who had been forced to flee their homeland? The more she listened and learned, the more she realized that many Idrians had never known the idyllic life she’d lived in her mountain valley.

 “Meeting is three days hence, my lady,” Thame said.

 Vivenna nodded. “I will come.”

 “Thank you.” And, with that, Thame rose--bowed, despite the fact that she’d asked him not to draw attention to her--and withdrew.

 Vivenna sat and sipped her juice. She felt Denth before he arrived.

 “You know what interests me?” he said, taking the seat Thame had been using.

 “What?”

 “People,” he said, tapping an empty cup, drawing the serving man back over. “They interest me. Particularly people who don’t act like they’re supposed to. People who surprise you.”

 “I hope you aren’t talking about Thame,” Vivenna asked, raising an eyebrow.

 Denth shook his head. “I’m talking about you, princess. Wasn’t too long ago that--no matter what or who you looked at--you had a look of quiet displeasure in your eyes. You’ve lost it, a bit. You’re starting to fit in.”

 “Then that’s a problem, Denth,” Vivenna said. “I don’t want to fit in. I hate Hallandren.”

 “You seem to like that juice all right,” Denth said, smiling.

 Vivenna set it aside. “You’re right, of course. I shouldn’t be drinking it.”

 “If you say so,” Denth said, shrugging. “Now, if you were to ask the mercenary--which, of course, nobody ever does--he might mention that it’s good for you to start acting like a Hallandren. The more waves you make, the more people will start looking to find the Idrian princess hiding in the city. The less you stand out, then, the less likely people are to connect you to that princess.”

 Vivenna looked down, sighing. Some things in her new life were actually starting to feel natural. The raids, for instance, were becoming surprisingly easy for her. She was also growing used to moving with the crowds and being part of an underground element. Two months ago, she would have been indignantly opposed to dealing with a man like Denth, simply because of his profession.

 And yet, she found it very difficult to reconcile some of these changes in her. It was growing harder and harder to understand herself, and do decide what she believed.

 She wasn’t supposed to be ostentatious. She shouldn’t stand out. Yet, by wearing modest dresses, she stood out. She wanted to blend in for her own safety, but blending in meant accepting--at least on the outside--the Hallandren fondness for bright colors.

 And then there were the Lifeless. Those she would never accept.

 “By the way,” Denth said, eyeing Vivenna’s dress. “You might want to think about switching to trousers.”

 Vivenna frowned, looking up.

 “Just a suggestion,” Denth said, then gulped down some juice. “You don’t like the short Hallandren skirts, but the only decent ones we can buy you that are ‘modest’ are of foreign make--and that makes them expensive. That means we have to use expensive restaurants, lest we stand out. That means you have to deal with all of this terrible lavishness. Trousers, however, are modest and cheap. Good alternative.”

 “Trousers are not modest.”

 “Don’t show knees,” he said.

 “Doesn’t matter.”

 Denth shrugged. “Just giving my opinion.”

 Vivenna looked away, then sighed quietly. “I appreciate the advice, Denth. Really. I just. . .I’m confused by a lot of things.”

 “World’s a confusing place,” Denth said. “That’s what makes it fun.”

 “The men we’re working with,” Vivenna said. “They lead the Idrians in the city, but exploit them at the same time. Lemks. He stole from my father, but still worked for the interests of my country. And, here I am, wearing an overpriced dress and sipping expensive juice while my sister is being abused by a terrible dictator.”

 Denth leaned back in his chair, looking out over the short railing toward the street, watching the crowds with their colors both beautiful and terrible. “The motivations of men,” he said. “They never make sense. And then, they always do.”

 “Right now, you don’t make sense.”

 Denth smiled. “Every man is a hero in his own story, princess. What I’m trying to say is that you don’t understand a man until you understand his motivations. Just sing his actions isn’t enough. I think most murderers don’t believe that they’re to blame for what they do. Thieves, they think they deserve the money they take. Dictators. . .they think they have the right--for the safety of their people--to do whatever they wish.”

 He stared off, shaking his head. “I think even Vasher sees himself as a hero. The truth is, most people who do what you’d call ‘wrong’ do it for what they call ‘right’ reasons. Only mercenaries make any sense. We do what we’re paid to do. That’s it. Perhaps that’s why people look down on us so. We’re the only ones they understand.”

 He paused, the met her eyes. “But, in a way, we’re the most honest men you’ll ever meet.”

 The two of them fell silent, the crowd passing by just a short distance away, a river of flashing colors.

 Another figure approached the table. “That’s right,” Tonk Fah said, “but, you forgot to mention that in addition to being honest, we’re also terribly clever. And handsome.”
 “Those both go without saying,” Denth said, rising.

 Vivenna turned. Tonk Fah, like Denth, had been watching from a distance. They were letting her start to take the lead in some of the meetings.

 “Honest, perhaps,” Vivenna said. “But I certainly hope that you’re not the most handsome men I’ll ever meet. Are we ready to go?”

 “Assuming you’re finished with your juice,” Denth said, smiling at her.

 Vivenna glanced at her cup. It was very good. Finally, feeling guilty, she took one last gulp. Then, she rose and swished her way from the building, leaving Denth--who handled most of the coins, now--to settle the bill. Outside on the street, she quickly spotted Clod watching beside a building. He’d been given orders to attack should Vivenna scream for his help.

 She turned, looking back at Tonk Fah and Denth as they joined her. “Tonks,” she said. “Where’s your monkey?”

 He sighed. “Monkeys are boring anyway.”

 She rolled her eyes. “You lost another one?”

 Denth chuckled. “Get used to it, princess. Of all the justices in the universe, one of the greatest is the fact that Tonks has never fathered a child. He’d probably lose it before the week was out.”

 She just shook her head. “And, you lost Peprin too, I see.”

 “Nah,” Tonk Fah said, nodding down the street. “He’s over there with Jewels.”

 Vivenna frowned, spotting the two watching from a lookout distance. Peprin was chatting away at Jewels--who looked like she was doing her best to ignore him.

 “I thought he usually stayed with you,” Vivenna said, turning to Tonk Fah.

 He just shrugged.

 “Whatever,” she said. “Next appointment. D’Denir garden, right?”

 Denth nodded.

 “Let’s go,” she said, walking down the street.

 The others trailed behind, picking up Peprin and Jewels on the way. Vivenna didn’t wait for Clod to begin forcing a way through the crowd for the group, she simply moved on her own. The less she depened on that Lifeless to help her, the better. Plus, moving through the crowds really wasn’t that difficult. There was an art to it--one had to move with the crowd, rather than trying to swim against its flow.

 It wasn’t too long before, Vivenna at the front, the group turned off into the D’Denir garden. Here, a wide field grew with grass. Like the crossroads where the group had set up the diversion a week back, this place was an open space of green life set among the buildings and colors. Yet, this one was different. No flowers or trees broke the landscape. There was more of a sense of peace to this lawn. It was a more reverent place.

 And it was filled with statues. Hundreds of them. They looked much like the other D’Denir in the city--with their oversized bodies and heroic poses, many tied with colorful cloths or garments. These were some of the oldest statures she had seen. Their stone was weathered from years spent out in the elements, enduring the frequent T’Telir rainfalls.

 This group was supposed to have been the final gift of Peacegiver the Blessed. The statues had been set to remind the people of the men who had died in the Manywar. A monument, and a warning. So the legends said. Vivenna figured that if the people really did honor those that had fallen, they wouldn’t dress the statues up in such ridiculous outfits.

 Still, the place was far more peaceful than most in T’Telir, and she could appreciate that. She walked down the steps, moving out onto the lawn, trailing between the silent stone figures.

 Denth moved up beside her. “Remember who we’re meeting?”

 She nodded. “Forgers.”
 Denth nodded. Then, he eyed her. “You all right with this?”

 “Denth, during our months together I’ve met with thief lords, murderers, and--most frighteningly--mercenaries. I think I can deal with a couple of spindly scribes.”

 Denth shook his head. “They aren’t what you’re expecting. The scribes are far away, doing the work. These are the men who sell the documents. You won’t meet more dangerous men than forgers. Within the Hallandren bureaucracy, they can make anything seem legal by sticking the right documents in the right places.”

 Vivenna nodded slowly.

 “You remember what to have them make?” Denth asked.

 “Of course I do,” she said. “This particular plan was my idea, remember?”

 “Just checking,” he said.

 She snorted. “You’re worried that I’ll mess things up, aren’t you?”

 He shrugged. “You’re the leader in this little dance, princess. I’m just the guy who mops the floor afterward.” He eyed her. “I hate mopping up blood.”

 “Oh, please,” she said, rolling her eyes, walking faster and leaving him behind. As he fell back, she could hear him talking to Tonk Fah.

 “Bad metaphor?” Denth asked.

 “Nah,” Tonk Fah said. “It had blood in it. That makes it a good metaphor.”

 “I think it lacked poetic style.”

 “Find something that rhymes with ‘blood’ then,” Tonk Fah suggested. He paused. “Mud? Cud? Uh. . .tastebud?”

 They sure are literate, for a bunch of thugs, she thought, shaking her head.

 She didn’t have to go far before she spotted the men. They waited beside the D’Denir that Denth had suggested as a meeting place--a large stone man with a weathered axe. The group of people were having a picnic and chatting among themselves.

 Vivenna slowed.

 “That’s them,” Denth whispered. “Let’s go sit beside the D’Denir across from them.”

 Vivenna nodded, and she glanced back at the others. Jewels, Clod, and Peprin hung back, while Tonk Fah began to stroll away and watch the perimeter. Vivenna and Denth approached the statue near to the forgers. Denth spread out a blanket for her, then stood to the side, as if he were a manservant guarding his lady during a day out.

 One of the men beside the other stature looked across as Vivenna sat down, then he nodded. The others continued to eat. The Hallandren underground’s penchant for working in broad daylight still unnerved Vivenna, but she supposed it did look more natural than skulking about at night.

 “You want some work commissioned?” the forger closest to her asked, just loudly enough that Vivenna could hear it from beside her statue. It almost seemed part of his conversation with his friends.

 “Yes,” she said.

 “It costs.”

 “I can pay.”
 “You’re the princess everyone is talking about?”

 She paused, noticing that Denth’s hand liersuly going to his sword hilt.

 “Yes,” she said.

 “Good,” the forger said. “Working with Royalty always means good coin. What is it you desire?”

 “Letters,” Vivenna said. “I want them to appear as if they were between certain members of the Hallandren priesthood and the king of Idris. They need to have official seals and signatures.”

 “Difficult,” the man said.

 Vivenna pulled something from her side pocket. “I have a letter written in King Dedalin’s hand. It has his seal on the wax, his signature at the bottom.”

 The man looked intrigued, though she could only see the side of his face. “That makes it possible. Still hard. What do you want these documents to prove?”

 “That these particular priests are corrupt,” Vivenna said. “I have a list on this sheet. I want you to make it seem like they’ve been extorting the king of Idris for years, making him pay money and make promises to keep them from going to war with him. I want you to show that the King of Idris doesn’t want war, and that the priests are hypocrites.”

 The man paused, then nodded. “Is that everything?”

 “Yes.”

 “It can be done. We’ll be in touch. Instructions and explanations are on the back of the paper?”

 “As requested,” Vivenna said.

 The group of men stood, a servant moving forward to pack up their lunch. As he did so, he let a napkin blow in the wind, then rushed over and picked it up, grabbing Vivenna’s paper with a deft motion. Soon, all of them were gone.

 “Well?” Vivenna asked, looking up.

 “Good,” Denth said, nodding to himself. “You’re becoming something of an expert at all of this.”

 Vivenna smiled, settling back on her blanket to wait. The next appointment consisted of a group of thieves who had stolen various goods from the war offices in the Hallandren bureaucratic building. The documents were of relatively little import--but their absence would cause some confusion and frustration.

 That appointment, however, wasn’t for a few hours. That meant she could enjoy a bit of time relaxing on the lawn, away from the unnatural colors of the city. Denth seemed to sense her attitude, and he sat down, lounging back against the side of the statue.

 As Vivenna waited, she again saw that Peprin was over talking to Jewels again. The young man was, of course, completely dressed in bright Hallandren colors. He’d given up on Idris styles long ago. He said he wanted to understand the Hallandren people.

 That’s well and good for him, Vivenna thought with annoyance, looking away. He can dress as he wishes--he doesn’t have to worry about his neckline or skirt length.

 He was to far away for her to hear exactly what he was saying, but she did recognize the familiar rise and flow of his voice, with characteristic exclaimed peaks coming at random intervals.

 Jewels laughed. It was almost more of a snort of derision, but there was some mirth in it. Or so it seemed. Vivenna looked back immediately, watching Jewels roll her eyes at Peprin, a self-effacing smirk on his face. He knew he’d said something silly. He didn’t know what. But Vivenna knew him well enough to read the expression, and to know that he’d just smile and go along with it.

 Jewels saw his face, then laughed again.

 Vivenna gritted her teeth. “I should send him back to Idris,” she finally said, looking away.

 Denth turned, looking down at her. “Hum?”

 “Peprin,” she said. “I sent the soldiers back. I should have sent him too. He serves no function in the team.”

 “He’s good at running errands,” Denth said. “And he seems trustworthy. That’s good enough reason to keep him.”

 “He’s a fool,” Vivenna said. “Has trouble understanding half of what goes on around him.”

 “Does well enough anyway,” Denth said. “Can’t all be geniuses like you.”

 She glanced up at Denth, frowning. “What does that mean?”

 “It means,” Denth said, “that you shouldn’t let your hair change colors in public, princess.”

 Vivenna started, noticing that her hair had shifted from a still, calm black to the red of frustration. Lord of Colors! she thought. I used to be so good at controlling that. What is happening to me?

 “Don’t worry,” Denth said, settling back. “Jewels has no interest in your friend. I promise you.”

 Vivenna snorted. “Peprin? Why should I care?”

 “Oh, I don’t know,” Denth said. “Maybe because you’ve been practically engaged to him since you were children?”

 “That’s completely untrue,” Vivenna said. “I’ve been engaged to the God King since before my birth!”
 “And your father always wished you could marry the son of his best friend instead,” Denth said. “At least, that’s what Peprin says.” He eyed her, then smiled.

 “That boy talks too much,” Vivenna said, turning away.

 “Either way, Jewels isn’t going to go for him,” Denth said. “She has other ties. So stop your worrying.”

 “I’m not worried,” Vivenna said. “And I’m not interested in Peprin.”

 “Of course not.”

 Vivenna opened her mouth to object, but she noticed Tonk Fah wandering over, and didn’t want him to start into the discussion as well. She snapped her jaw shut as the large-gutted mercenary joined them.

 “Flood,” Tonk Fah said.

 “Hum?” Denth asked.

 “Rhymes with blood,” Tonk Fah said. “Now you can be poetic. Flood of Blood. It even has as a nice visual image. Far better than tastebud.”

 “Ah, I see,” Denth said flatly. “Tonk Fah?”

 “Yes?”

 “You’re an idiot.”

 “Thanks.”

 Vivenna just shook her head to herself as she stood up and began to walk through the statues, studying them--if only to get herself away from having to listen to Peprin chat at Jewels. Tonk Fah and Denth tralied along behind at a comfortable distance, keeping a watchful eye on her.

 There was an actual beauty to the statues. They weren’t like the other kinds of art in T’Telir--flashy paintings, colorful buildings, exaggerated clothing. The D’Denir were solid blocks, and they had an age to them that gave them an air of dignity. The Hallandrens, of course, did their best to destroy this by tying the scarves, hats, or other colorful bits to the stone memorials. And yet, there were too many in this garden for them to all be decorated.

 They stood, somehow more solid than much of the city. Most stared up into the sky or looked straight ahead. Each one was different, each pose distinct, each face constructed differently by the sculptor.

 It must have taken decades to create all of these, she thought. Perhaps that’s where the Hallandrens got their penchant for art. Their very first king, the one they revere for saving them from war, ordered an artistic project that would have taken a lifetime to complete.

 Hallandren was such a place of contradictions. Warriors to represent peace. Idrians who exploited each other and protected each other at the same time. Mercenaries who seemed to be among the best men she had ever known. Bright colors that created a uniformity.

 And, above it all, BioChromatic Breath. In most crowds, she could find a few people who bore excess breath. Most were of the First Heightening, causing little pockets of color. She’d occasionally pass one of the Second Heightening, rich enough to trail guards and servants. Even people beyond that were not all that rare.

 It was exploitive. Yet, people like Jewels seemed to see giving up their Breath as a privilege. Contradictions.

 The question was, could Vivenna afford to become another contradiction? A person who bent her beliefs in order to see that they were preserved?

 The longer she held Lemks Breaths, the more aware she became of the changes within herself. And those was the things that bothered her most. The real source of her confusion. The reason she’d been occasionally snappish with Denth and the others.

 The Breaths were wonderful. It was more than just the beauty--the ability to hear changes in sound and sense intrinsically the distinct hues of color. It was even more than the ability to sense life around her--the ability to sense people approaching, watching, or noticing her. More than the sounds of the wind, of the tones of people talking, or her ability to feel her way through a group of people and move with the motions of a crowd.

 It was a connection. The things around her felt close to her. Things like her clothing, discarded twigs on the ground. Things which were dead, yet for some reason seemed like they yearned for life again.

 She could give it to them. They remembered life, and she could Awaken those memories. Denth had mentioned several times how much easier their various plans would go if they had a powerful Awakener to use as a resource.

 But, what good would it do to save her people if she lost herself?

 Denth doesn’t seem lost, she thought. He and the other mercenaries can separate what they believe from what they are forced to do.

 In her quiet opinion, that was why people regarded mercenaries like they did. And, for the most part, she agreed with that opinion. If you divorced belief from action, then you were on dangerous ground.

 No, she thought. No Awakening for me.

 The Breath would remain as it was. And, if it tempted her too much further, she would give the lot away to somebody who had none.

 And become a Drab herself.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty

 Tell me about the mountains, Susebron wrote.

 Siri smiled. “Mountains?”

 Please, he wrote, sitting in his chair beside the bed. Siri was laying on one side, a sheet over her, resting on one elbow so she could see what he wrote. The fire crackled.

 “I don’t know what you tell you,” she said. “I mean, the mountains aren’t something amazing like the wonders you have in T’Telir. You have so many colors, so much variety.”

 I think that rocks sticking from the ground, going up thousands of feet into the air, is variety, he wrote.

 “I guess,” she said. “I liked it there--I didn’t really ever want to know anything else. For someone like you, though, it would probably be boring.”

 More boring than sitting in the same palace every day, not allowed to leave, not allowed to speak, being dressed and pampered?

 Siri paused. “Okay, you win.”

 Tell me of them, please. His handwriting was getting very good, all things considered. And, the more he wrote, the more he seemed to understand. She wished so much that she could find him books to read and digest--she suspected that he’d absorb them quickly, becoming as learned as any of the scholars who had tried to tutor her.

 And yet, all he had was Siri. He seemed to appreciate what she gave him--but that was probably just because he didn’t know just how ignorant she was.

 And again, she thought, I find myself wishing I’d listened to my tutors. I suspect a few of them would laugh themselves silly if they knew how much I’d come to regret ignoring them.

 “The mountains are. . .vast,” Siri said. “You can’t really get a sense of it here, in the lowlands. They are so large that they tower. It’s by watching them that you get a sense of just how insignificant people really are. I mean, no matter how long we worked and built, we could never pile up anything as high as one of the mountains.

 “They’re rocks, like you said, but they’re not lifeless. They’re green--as green as your jungles down here. But it’s a different green. I heard some of the traveling merchants complain that the mountains cut off view, not letting you see as far. But, I think you can see more. They let you see the surface of the land as it extends upward, toward Austre’s domain in the sky.”

 He paused. Austre?

 Siri flushed, hair blushing as well. “I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t talk about other gods in front of you.”

 Other gods? he wrote. Like those in the court?

 “No,” Siri said. “Austre is the Idrian God.”

 I understand, Susebron wrote. Is he very handsome?

 Siri laughed. “No, you don’t understand. He’s not a Returned, like you or Lightsong or the others. He’s. . .well, I don’t know. Didn’t the priests ever mention other religions to you?”

 Other religions? he wrote.

 “Sure,” she said. “I mean, not everybody worships the Returned. The Idrians like me worship Austre, and the Pahn Kahl people--like Bluefingers. . .well, I don’t actually know what they worship, but it’s not you.”

 That is very strange to consider, he wrote. If your Gods are not Returned, then what are they?

 “Not they,” Siri said. “Just one. We think there is only one God--we call him Austre. The Hallandren used to worship him too before. . . .” She almost said before they became heretics. “Before Peacegiver arrived, and they decided to worship the Returned instead.”

 But who is this Austre? he wrote.

 “He’s not a person,” Siri said. “He’s more of a force. You know, the thing that watches over all people, who punishes those who don’t do what is right and who blesses those who are worthy.”

 Have you met this creature?

 Siri laughed. “Of course not. You can’t see Austre.”

 Susebron frowned, looking at her.

 “I know,” she said. “It seems silly to you, I’ll bet. But. . .well, we know he’s there. Or, I guess that some people do. My sister, Vivenna, she knows a lot more about this than I do. Yet, I’ve always believed. When I see something beautiful in nature--when I look at the mountains, with their wildflowers growing in patterns that are somehow more right than a man could have planted--I know. Beauty is real. That’s what reminds me of Austre Plus, we’ve got the Returned--including the First Returned, Vo. He had the Five Visions before he died, and they must have come from somewhere.”

 But, you don’t believe in worshiping the Returned?

 Siri shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. But, my people teach strongly against it. They’re not fond of the way that Hallandrens do things.”

 He sat quietly for a long moment.

 So. . .you do not like those such as me?

 “What? Of course I like you! You’re sweet!”

 He frowned, writing. I do not think God Kings are supposed to be “sweet.”

 “Fine, then,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You’re terrible and mighty. Awesome and deific. And sweet.”

 Much better, he wrote, smiling. I should very much like to see this Austre.

 “I’ll introduce you to some monks sometime,” Siri said. “They should be able to help you with that.”

 Now you are mocking me.

 Siri smiled as he looked up at her. There was no hurt in his eyes. He didn’t appear to mind being mocked; indeed, he seemed to find it very interesting. He particularly liked trying to pick out when she was being serious and when she wasn’t.

 He looked down again. More than meeting with this God, however, I should like to see the mountains. You seem to love them very much.

 “I do,” Siri said. It had been a time since she’d thought of Idris--after her early homesickness, she’d given up hope of returning home, and it had seemed better to focus on what was around her.

 But, as she thought about it, she remembered the cool, open feeling of the fields she had run through not so long before. The chill of the crisp air--something that she suspected one could never find in Hallandren, with its hot days and humid temperatures.

 Everything in the Court of Gods was kept perfectly clipped, cultivated, and arranged. It was beautiful, but the wild fields of her homeland had a special feel of their own.

 Susebron was writing again. I suspect that the mountains are beautiful, as you have said. However, I believe the most beautiful thing in them has already come down to me.

 Siri started, then flushed as he looked up at her. He seemed so open, not even a little embarrassed or shy about the bold compliment.

 “Susebron!” she said. “You have the heart of a charmer.”

 Charmer? He wrote. I must only speak what I see. There is nothing so wonderful as you, even in my entire Court. The mountains must be special indeed, to produce such beauty.

 “See, now you’ve gone too far,” she said. “I’ve seen the Goddesses of your court. They’re far more beautiful than I am.”

 Beauty is not about how a person looks, Susebron wrote. My mother taught me this, and it is spoken of in my book. The travelers in the stories must not judge the old woman ugly, for she might be a beautiful Goddess inside.

 “This isn’t a story, Susebron.”

 Yes it is, he said. All of those stories are just tales told by people who lived lives. But, what they say about humankind is true. I have watched and seen how people act.

 He erased, then continued. It is strange, for me, to try and interpret these things, for I do not see as normal men do. I am the God King. Everything, to my eyes, has the same beauty.

 Siri frowned. “I don’t understand.”

 I have thousands of Breaths, he wrote. It is hard to see as other people do--only through the stories of my mother can I understand. All colors are beauty in my eyes. When you look at something--a person--they seem sometimes more beautiful than others.

 This is not so for me. I see only the color. The rich, wondrous colors that make up all things and give them life. I cannot focus only on the face, like so many do. I see the sparkle of the eyes, the blush of the cheeks, the tones of skin--even each blemish is a wonderful pattern. All people are the same, in looks.

 He erased. And so, when I speak of beauty, I must speak of things other than these colors--for they are all the same. And you are different. I do not know how to describe it.

 He looked up, and suddenly Siri was aware of just how close they were to each other. She, only in her shift, with the thin sheet covering her. He, tall and broad as a giant, shining with a soul that made the colors of the sheets bend out like light through a prism. He smiled in the firelight.

 Oh, dear. . . . she thought. This is dangerous.

 She cleared her throat, sitting up, flushing yet again. “Well. Um, yes. Very nice. Thank you.”

 He looked back down. I wish I could let you go home, to see your mountains again. Perhaps I could explain this to the priests.

 She paled. “I don’t think it would be good to let them know that you can read.”

 I could use the artisan’s script. It is very difficult to write, but they taught it to me so I could communicate with them, if I needed to.

 “Still,” she said. “Telling them you want to send me home could hint that you’ve been talking to me.”

 He stopped writing for a few moments.

 Maybe that would be a good thing, he said.

 “Susebron, they’re planning to kill you.”

 You have no proof of that.

 “Well, it’s suspicious, at least,” she said. “The last two God Kings died within a few months of producing an heir.”

 You’re too untrusting, Susebron said. I keep telling you. My priests are good people.

 She regarded him flatly, catching his eyes.

 Except for removing my tongue, he admitted.

 “And keeping you locked up, and not telling you anything. Look, even if they aren’t planning to kill you, they know things they’re not telling you. Perhaps it’s something to do with BioChroma--something that makes you die once your heir arrives.”

 She frowned, leaning back.

 Could that be it? she wondered suddenly. “Susebron, how do you pass on your Breaths?”

 He paused. I don’t know, he wrote. I. . .don’t know a lot about it.

 “I don’t either,” she said. “Can they take them from you somehow? Give them to your son? What if that kills you?”

 They wouldn’t do that, he wrote.

 “But maybe it’s possible,” she said. “And maybe that’s what happens. That’s why having a child is so dangerous! They have to make a new God King, and it kills you to do so.”

 He sat with his board in his lap, then shook his head, writing. I am a God. I am not given Breaths, I am born with them.

 “No,” Siri said. “Bluefingers told me you’d been collecting them for centuries. That each God King gets two Breaths a week, instead of one, building up his reserves.”

 Actually, he admitted, some weeks I get three or four.

 “But you only need one to survive.”

 Yes.

 “And they can’t let that wealth die with you! They’re too afraid of it to let you use it, but they also can’t let themselves lose it. So, when a new child is born, they take the Breath from the old king--killing him--and give it to the new one.”

 Susebron sat for a few moments, and then finally he rose, walking across the room. He moved up to the window, staring out at the darkness beyond.

 Siri sat for a few moments, then rose, picking up his board and crossing the room. She approached him, wearing only her shift.

 “Susebron?” she asked.

 He continued to stare out the window. She joined him, careful not to touch him, looking out. Colorful lights sparkled the city beyond the wall of the Court of Gods. Beyond that was darkness. The still sea.

 “Please,” she said, pushing the board into his hands. “What is it?”

 He paused, then took it. I am sorry, he wrote. I do not wish to appear petulant.

 “Is it because I keep challenging your priests?”

 No, he wrote. You have interesting theories, but I think they are just guesses. You do not know that the priests plan what you claim. But, that doesn’t bother me.

 “What is it, then?”
 He paused, then erased with the sleeve of his robe. You do not believe that the Returned are divine.

 “I. . .thought we already talked about this.”

 We did. However, I now realized that this is the reason why you treat me like you do. You are different because you do not believe in my Godhood. I wonder, is that the only reason I find you interesting?

 And, if you do not believe, it makes me sad. Because a God is who I am, it is what I am, and if you do not believe in it, it makes me think you do not understand me.

 He paused.

 Yes. It does sound petulant. I am sorry.

 She smiled, then tentatively touched his arm. He paused, looking down, but didn’t pull back as he had times before. So, she moved up beside him, resting a bit against his arm.

 “I don’t have to believe in you to understand you,” she said. “I’d say that those people who worship you are the ones who don’t understand you. They can’t get close to you, see who you really are. They’re to focused on the aura and the divinity.”

 He didn’t respond.

 “And,” she said, “I’m not different just because I don’t believe in you. There are a lot of people in the palace who don’t believe. Bluefingers, some of the serving girls who wear brown, other scribes. They serve you just as reverently as the priests. I’m just. . .well, I’m an irreverent type. I didn’t really listen to my father or the monks back home, either. Maybe that’s what you need. Someone who would be willing to look beyond your godhood and just get to know you.”

 He nodded slowly. That is comforting, he wrote. Though, it is very strange to be a God who’s wife does not believe in him.

 She paused. Wife. Sometimes that was tough to remember, even still. “Well,” she said, “I should think it would do every man a little good to have a wife who isn’t as in awe of him as everyone else is. Somebody has to keep you humble.”

 Humility is, I believe, somewhat opposite of Godhood.

 “Like sweetness?” she asked.

 He chuckled. Yes, just like that. He put the board down. Then, hesitantly--a little frightened--he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer as they looked out the window at the lights of a city that remained colorful, even at night.

#

 Bodies. Four of them. They all lay dead on the ground, blood an oddly dark color against the grass.

 It was the day after Vivenna’s visit to the D’Denir garden to meet with the forgers. She was back again.

 Sunlight streamed down, hot upon her head and neck, as she stood with the rest of the gawking crowd. The silent D’Denir stood in rows behind her, soldiers of stone who would never march, some of them missing arms to the elements. Only they had seen the four men get killed.

 People chatted and gawked, waiting for the city guard. Denth had brought Vivenna quickly, before the bodies could be cleared. He had done so at her request.

 Now she wished she’d never asked.

 To her enhanced, Awakener eyes, the colors of the blood on grass were powerfully distinct. Red and green. It made almost a violet in combination. She stared at the corpses, feeling an odd sense of disconnect. Color. So strange to see the colors of skin paled as they were. She could tell the difference--the intrinsic numerical difference--between skin that was alive and skin that was dead.

 It came from blood seeping down and out of the veins. It was like. . .like the blood was the color, drained out of the husks and onto the ground. The paint of a human life which had been carelessly spilt, leaving the canvas white.

 She looked away.

 “You see it?” Denth said, at her side.

 She nodded silently.

 “You asked about him. Well, here’s what he does. This is why we’re so worried. Look closer at those wounds.”

 She turned back, looking more closely at the sword wounds. The men had apparently died in the early hours of night, right before sunrise. And, in the growing light, she could see something beneath the folds of clothing that she’d missed before.

 The skin directly around the wounds had been completely drained of color. Like the skin of a Lifeless. And, more than that, the wounds themselves had a dark black twinge to them. Like they had been infected with some terrible disease.

 She turned back to Denth.

 “Let’s go,” Denth said, leading her away from the crowd as the city watch finally arrived and began pushing people back from the corpses.

 “Who were they?” she asked quietly.

 Denth stared straight ahead. “A gang of thieves. I’m not sure what their importance was to him--they weren’t people we had worked with.”

 “You think he might come for us?”

 “I’m not sure,” Denth said. “He could probably find us, if he wanted. I don’t know.”

 Tonk Fah approached across the green as they passed through the D’Denir statues.

 Denth doesn’t think it’s related to us, she thought. But, why the coincidence, then? Bodies are found, slaughtered, in the very place where we had a clandestine meeting the day before?

 Is there a connection?

 “Jewels and Clod are on alert,” Tonk Fah said as he joined them. “None of us see him anywhere.”

 “What happened to the skin of those men?” Vivenna asked.

 “It’s that sword of his,” Denth growled. “We have to find a way to deal with it, Tonks. We’re going to end up crossing him, eventually. I can feel it.”

 “But, what is the sword?” Vivenna asked. “And how did it drain the color from their skin?”

 “We’ll have to steal the sword then, Denth,” Tonk Fah said, rubbing his chin as Jewels and Clod filled in around them, making a protective pattern as they moved out into the human river of the street beyond.

 “Steal the sword?” Denth asked. “I’m not touching the thing. No, that’s not the way. We have to make him use it. Draw it. He won’t be able to keep it out for long. After that, we’ll be able to take him easily. Without the sword, he’s not a threat. I’ll kill him myself.”

 “He beat Arsteel,” Jewels said quietly.

 Denth froze. “He did not beat Arsteel! Not in a duel, at least.”

 “Vasher didn’t use the sword,” Jewels said. “There was no blackness around Arsteel’s wounds.”

 “Then Vasher used a trick of some sort!” Denth said. “Ambushed him. Used accomplices. Something. Vasher is no duelist.”

 Vivenna let herself get pulled along quietly, thinking of those bodies. Denth and the others had spoken of the deaths before. She’d wanted to see them. She’d told them to fetch her, next time word of one of Vasher’s strikes was made known.

 Well, now they had. And it left her feeling disturbed. Unsettled. And. . . .

 She frowned, inching slightly.

 Someone--someone with a lot of Breath--was watching her.

#

 Hey! Nightblood said. It’s Varatridees! We should go talk to him. He’ll be happy to see me.

 Vasher stood quietly atop the building. He didn’t really care who saw him. He rarely did.

 A flow of people passed on the colorful street below. Varatridees--Denth, as he called himself now--walked among them. His team was there too. The woman, Jewels. Tonk Fah, as always. The clueless princess. And the abomination.

 Is Shashara here? Nightblood asked, excitement in his nebulous voice. We need to go see her! She’ll be worried about what happened to me.

 “We killed Shashara long ago, Nightblood,” Vasher said. “Just like we killed Arsteel.” Just like we’ll eventually kill Denth. Most likely.

 As usual, Nightblood refused to acknowledge Shashara’s death. She made me, you know, Nightblood said. Made me to destroy things that were evil. I’m rather good at it. I think she’d be proud of me. We should go talk to her. Show her how well I do my job.

 “You are good at it,” Vasher whispered. “Too good.”

 Nightblood began to hum quietly in Vasher’s mind, pleased at the perceived praise. Vasher, however, wasn’t paying much attention to the sword. He was focused on the princess, walking in her obviously exotic dress, standing out like a flake of snow in the tropical heat.

 He would need to do something about her. Quickly. Because of her, so many things were falling apart. Plans toppling like carefully stacked boxes, creating a racket with their demise.

 He didn’t know where Denth had found her, or how he kept control of her. However, Vasher was getting fairly angry at her interference, he was sorely tempted to jump down and let Nightblood take her.

 However, the deaths the night before had already drawn too much attention. Nightblood was right. Vasher wasn’t good at sneaking about. Already, rumors regarding him were prevalent in the city. That was both good and bad.

 Later, he thought, turning from the silly girl and her mercenary entourage. Later.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-One

 “Lightsong!” Blushweaver said, hands on hips as she regarded him. “What in the name of the Iridescent Tones are you doing?”
 Lightsong ignored her, instead applying his hands to the clump of muddy clay in front of him. His servants and priests stood in a large ring, waiting patiently, looking nearly as confused as Blushweaver--who had arrived at his pavilion just a few moments before.

 The pottery wheel spun, picking up speed. He held at the clay, trying to get it to stay in place. Sunlight shone in through the sides of the pavilion, and the neat, manicured grass beneath his table was flaked with mud.

 As the wheel sped up, the clay twirled about, flipping out bits and chunks. Lightsong’s hands became soaked with grimy, slick clay, and it didn’t take long for the entire mess to flip off the wheel and squish to the ground beside his stool.

 “Hum,” he said, regarding it.

 “Have you taken leave of your senses?” Blushweaver asked. She wore one of her customary dresses--which meant nothing on the sides, very little through the top, and only slightly more through the front and back. She had her hair up in an intricate twisting pattern of weaves, braids, and ribbon. Likely the work of a master stylist, who had been invited into the Court to perform for one of the Gods.

 Lightsong hopped to his feet, holding his hands out to the sides as servants rushed forward to wash them off. Others came and wiped the bits of clay from his fine robes. He stood thoughtfully as other servants removed the pottery wheel.

 “Well?” Blushweaver asked. “What was that?”

 “I just discovered that I am no good at making pottery,” Lightsong said. “Actually, I am worse than ‘no good.’ I am pathetic at it. Ridiculously bad. Can’t even get the blasted clay to stay on the wheel.”

 “Well, what did you expect?”.

 “I’m not sure,” Lightsong said, walking across the pavilion toward a long table. Blushweaver--obviously annoyed at being led along--followed.

 Lightsong spun, grabbing five lemons off of the table and throwing them into the air. He proceeded to begin juggling them.

 Blushweaver watched. And, for just a moment, she looked honestly concerned. “Lightsong?” she asked, brow wrinkling. “Dear. Is. . .everything all right?”

 “I have never practiced juggling,” he said, watching the lemons. “Here, throw me that guava fruit.”

 She paused, then carefully picked up the guava.

 “Throw it,” Lightsong said.

 She tossed it at him. He deftly grabbed it from the air, then threw it into the mix with the lemons.

 “I didn’t know I could do this,” he said. “Not before today. What do you make of it?”

 “I. . . .” she cocked her head.

 He laughed. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen you at a loss for words, my dear.”

 “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen another God throwing fruit into the air.”

 “It’s more than this,” Lightsong said, dipping down as he nearly lost one of the lemons. “Today, I have discovered that I know an irregular number of sailing terms, that I am fantastic at mathmatics, and that I actually have a fairly good eye for sketching. On the other hand, I know nothing about the dying industry, horses, or gardening. I have no eye for sculpting, I can’t speak any foreign languages, and--as you’ve seen--I’m terrible at pottery.”

 Blushweaver watched him for a second.

 He looked at her, letting the lemons drop but snatching the guava out of the air. He tossed it to a servant, who began peeling it for him.

 “My previous life, Blushweaver. These are skills that I--Lightsong--have no right to know. Yet, whomever I was before I died, he could juggle. He knew about sailing. And he could sketch.”

 “We’re not supposed to worry about the people we were before,” Blushweaver said.

 “I’m a God,” Lightsong said, taking back a plate containing the peeled and sliced guava, then offering a piece to Blushweaver. “And, by the Colors, I’ll worry about whatever I please.”

 She paused, then smiled and took slice. “Just when I thought I had you figured out. . . .”

 “You didn’t have me figured out,” he said lightly. “And neither did I. That’s the point of this all. Shall we go?”

 She nodded, joining him as they began to cross the lawn, their servants bringing parasols to shade them.

 “You can’t tell me that you’ve never wondered,” Lightsong said.

 “My dear,” she replied, sucking on a guava piece, “I was boring before.”

 “How do you know?”

 “Because I was a regular person! I would have been. . .ordinary. Have you seen regular women?”

 “Their proportions aren’t quite up to your standards, I know,” he said. “But many are quite attractive.”

 Blushweaver shivered. “Please. Why would you want to know about your normal life? I mean, what if you were a murderer or a rapist? What if you were a bad dresser?”

 He snorted at the twinkle in her eye. “You act so shallow. But I see the curiosity. You should try some of these things. Discover what you were good at, and let it tell you a little of who you were.”

 “Hum,” she said, smiling and siding up to him. He paused as she ran her finger down the front of his chest. “Well, if you’re trying new things today, maybe there’s something else you ought to think about. . . .”

 “Don’t try and change the subject, my dear.”

 “I’m not,” she said. “But, how will you know who you were if you don’t try? It would be an. . .experiment.”

 Lightsong laughed, pushing her hand away. “My dear, I fear you would find me less than satisfactory.”

 “I think you over-estimate me.”

 “Impossible.”

 She paused, flushing slightly.

 “Uh. . . .” Lightsong said. “Hum. I didn’t exactly mean. . . .”

 “Oh, bother,” she said. “Now you’ve spoiled the moment. I was about to say something very clever, I just know it.”

 He smiled. “Both of us, at a loss for words in one afternoon. I do believe we’re losing our touch.”

 “You could find my touch if you’d just let yourself,” she said, smiling.

 He rolled his eyes and continued to walk. “You’re hopeless.”

 “When all else fails, use sexual innuendo,” she said lightly, joining him. “It always brings the focus back to where it belongs. On me.”

 “Hopeless,” he said again. “But, I doubt we have time for me to chastise you again. We’ve arrived.”

 Indeed, Hopefinder’s palace was before them. Lavender and silver, it had a pavilion out front set with table settings and food. Blushweaver and Lightsong had, of course, arranged for the meeting ahead of time.

 Hopefinder the Just, god of innocence and beauty, stood up as they approached. He looked to be about thirteen years old. By physical age, he was the youngest of the Gods in the court. However, they weren’t supposed to acknowledge such things. After all, he’d Returned when his body had been two, which put him--in God years--as being Lightsong’s senior by several years.

 “Lightsong, Blushweaver,” he said, stiff and formal. “Welcome.”

 “Thank you, dear,” Blushweaver said, smiling at him.

 Hopefinder simply nodded stiffly, then gestured toward the tables. The three small tables were separate, but sat closely enough together for the meal to remain intimate while giving each God their own space.

 “How have you been, Hopefinder?” Lightsong asked, sitting.

 “Very well,” Hopefinder said. His voice always seemed a little too. . .old for his body. Like a boy trying to imitate his father. “Though, there was a particularly difficult case during Petitions this morning. A mother with her last child, dying of the fevers. She’d already lost the other three, as well as her husband. All in the space of a year. Tragic.”

 “My dear,” Blushweaver said with concern. “You’re not actually considering. . .passing your Breath, are you?”

 Hopefinder shook his head, sitting. “I don’t know, Blushweaver. I am old. I feel old. Perhaps it is time for me to go. I’m fifth most aged, you know.”

 “Yes, but with the times growing so exciting!” she said.

 “Exciting?” he asked. “Why, they’re calming down. The new queen is here, and my sources in the palace say that she’s pursuing her duties to produce an heir with great vigor. Stability will soon arrive.”

 “Stability?” Blushweaver asked as the servants bought them each a chilled soup. “Hopefinder, I find it hard to believe that you’re so uninformed.”

 “You think the Idrians plan to use the new queen to play for the throne,” Hopefinder said flatly. “I know what you’ve been doing, Blushweaver. I disagree.”

 “And the rumors out in the city?” Blushweaver said. “The Idrian agents who are causing such a ruckus? This so called princess of theirs?”

 Lightsong paused, spoon halfway to his lips. What was that?

 “The city’s Idrians are always creating one crisis or another,” Hopefinder said, waving his fingers dismissively. “Foreign workers rarely provide a stable societal underclass, no matter which city you are in. I don’t fear them.”

 “They’ve never claimed to have a Royal agent working with them,” Blushweaver said. “Things could get out of hand very quickly.”

 “My interests in the city are quite secure,” Hopefinder said, lacing his fingers in front of him. The servants took away his soup. He’d taken only three sips. “How about yours?”

 “That’s what I’m trying to do,” Blushweaver said.

 “Excuse me,” Lightsong said, raising a finger. “But what in the colors are we talking about?”

 “Unrest in the city, Lightsong,” Hopefinder said. “Some of the locals are unsettled by the prospect of war.”

 “They could turn dangerous very easily,” Blushweaver said, stirring her soup with a lazy motion. “I think that we should be prepared.”

 “I believe that I am,” Hopefinder said, watching Blushweaver with his too-young face. Like all younger Returned--the God King included--Hopefinder would continue to age until his body stopped the maturation process. Then, he would freeze at that age--the brink of adulthood--until he gave up his Breath to heal one of the Petitioners.

 And yet, he acted so much like an adult. Lightsong hadn’t interacted much with children. Some of his attendants--when training--were youths. And, there were often youth performers who would come in. On a couple of occasions, he had met with groups of children to provide them with blessings or the like.

 Hopefinder was not one of these. Stories--from before Lightsong had Returned--said that Hopefinder, like other young returned, had matured very quickly during his first years of new life.

 He and Blushweaver ntinued to talk about the stability of the city, mentioning various acts of vandalism or burglary. Lightsong, however, was more interested in watching Hopefinder, seeing how he interacted as one of the Gods.

 He doesn’t seem to find Blushweaver distracting, Lightsong thought as he watched. She began in on the fruit course, acting characteristically luscious as she sucked on pieces of pineapple. Yet, Hopefinder either didn’t care, or didn’t notice, as she leaned forward, showing an alarming amount of cleavage.

 Something is different about him, Lightsong thought. He Returned when he was a child, and acted like one for a very short time--but he quickly aged mentally. Now, he’s an adult in some ways, but a child in others.

 Obviously, this came from more than just hold-over skills the mortal Hopefinder had learned before dying. The transformation provided something. It had made Hopefinder more mature. And, it had also changed his body--he was taller and more physically impressive than regular boys his age, even if he didn’t have the chisled, majestic features of a fully grown god.

 And yet, Lighstong thought, eating a piece of pineapple, different Gods have different body styles. Blushweaver is inhumanly well-endowed up top, particularly for how thin she is. Yet, Mercystar is plump and curvaceous all around.

 Lightsong hadn’t really thought about how he looked. He knew he knew he didn’t really deserve his powerful physique--yet, as the thought about it, he wasn’t certain how he knew. Like the knowledge of how to juggle, he somehow understood that a person usually had to work hard in a labor job to obtain a muscular body like he had. Lounging about, eating and drinking, should have made him plump.

 But. . .there have been Gods who were fat, he thought, remembering some of the pictures he had seen of Returned who had come before him. There was a time in our culture when that was seen as the ideal. . . .

 Then, did the way a Returned looked have something to do with the way society viewed them? Perhaps their opinion of an ideal body? That would certainly explain Blushweaver.

 Some things survived the transformation. Language. Skills. And, as he thought about it, social competence. Considering the fact that the Gods spent their lives locked up atop a plateau, they probably should have been far less well-adjusted than they were. At the very least, they should have been ignorant and naive. And yet, most of them were consumate schemers with a surprisingly good grasp on what happened in the outside world.

 Yet, memory itself didn’t survive. Why? Why could Lightsong juggle and understand the meaning of the word bowsprit, yet at the same time be unable to remember who his parents had been?

 And who was that face he saw in his dreams? Why did he visualize storms and tempests? What was the red panther that appeared, yet again, in his nightmares the night before?

 “Blushweaver,” Hopefinder said, holding up a hand. “Enough. Before we go any further, I must point out that your obvious attempts to seduce me will gain you nothing.”

 Blushweaver glanced away, looking a bit embarrassed.

 Lightsong shook himself out of his contemplations. “My dear Hopefinder,” he said. “She was not trying to seduce you. You must understand, she acts that way around everyone.”

 “Regardless,” he said. “I will not be swayed by her paranoid arguments and worries.”

 “My contacts do not think that these things are simple ‘paranoia,’” Blushweaver said, looking back at him as the fruit dishes were removed. A small chilled fish fillet arrived next.

 “Contacts?” Hopefinder asked. “And just who are these ‘contacts’ you keep mentioning?”

 “People within the God King’s palace itself.”

 “We all have people in the God King’s palace,” Hopefinder said dismissively.

 “I don’t,” Lightsong said. “I’ve thought about sending a dog in there once. No people, though.”

 Blushweaver rolled her eyes. “My contact is quite important. He hears things, knows things. War is coming, Hopefinder.”

 “I don’t believe you,” he said, picking at his food, “but that doesn’t really matter now, does it? You’re not here to get me to believe you. You just want my army.”

 “Your codes,” Blushweaver said. “Lifeless Command words. What will it cost us to get them?”

 Hopefinder picked at his fish some more. “Do you know, Blushweaver, why I find life so boring?”

 She shook he head. “Honestly, I still think you’re bluffing on that count, my dear.”

 “I’m not,” he said. “I’ve grown tired of this all. eleven years. Eleven years of peace. Eight years to grow to sincerely loath this system of government we have.

 “We all attend the court of judgement. We listen to the arguments. But most of us don’t matter. Most votes are sectional, administered only by those Gods or Goddesses who have influence--and a vote--in a particular area. Four of us have Lifeless Commands. When war comes, we are important. The rest of the time, our opinion rarely matters.

 “And so, you want my Lifeless? Be welcome to them! I have had no opportunity to use then in eleven years, and I venture that another eleven will pass without incident. However, you will trade me your vote. You sit on the council of social ills. You have a vote practically every week. You can havve my Lifeless, but you must promise me your vote on the council of social ills, from now until one of us dies.”

 Blushweaver paused. The pavilion fell silent.

 “Ah, so now you reconsider,” Hopefinder said, smiling. “I’ve heard you complain about your duties in court--that you find your votes trivial. Well, it’s not so easy to let go of them, is it? Your vote is all the influence you have. It isn’t flashy, but it is potent. It--”

 “Done,” Blushweaver said sharply.

 Hopefinder cut off.

 “My vote is yours,” Blushweaver said, meeting his eyes. “The terms are acceptable. I swear it in front of your priests and mine, before another God even.”

 By the Colors, Lightsong thought, staring at her. She really is serious. Part of him had assumed, all along, that her posturing about the war was just another game. Something to play with for the time.

 And yet, the woman who stared Hopefinder in the eyes was not playing. She sincerely believed that Hallandren was in danger. Grave danger. And she wanted to make certain that the armies were unified and prepared. She cared.

 And that left him worried. What had he gotten himself into? What if there really was a war? As he watched the interaction of the two Gods before him, he was left chilled by how easily and quickly they dealt in votes in the court and the fate of the Hallandren people. To Hopefinder, his control of a quarter of the Hallandren armies should have been a sacred duty. And yet, he was ready to toss that aside, simply because he had grown bored.

 Who am I to chastise another’s lack of piety? Lightsong though. I, who don’t even believe in my own divinity.

 And yet. . .at that moment, as Hopefinder prepared to release his Commands to Blushweaver, Lightsong thought he saw something. Like a remembered fragment of a memory. A dream that he might have dreamed.

 A shining room, glowing, reflecting light. A room of steel.

 A prison.

 “Servants and priests, withdraw,” Hopefinder commanded.

 They retreated, leaving the three Gods alone beside their half-eaten meals, pavilion canvas flapping slightly in the wind.

 “The command words,” Hopefinder said, looking at Blushweaver, “are ‘A candle by which to see.’”

 It was the title of a famous poem--even Lightsong knew it. Blushweaver smiled. By speaking those words beside any of Hopefinder’s ten thousand Lifeless who waited in the barracks at the base of the plateau, she could override their current orders and take complete control of them.

 “And now, I withdraw,” Hopefinder said, standing. “There is a vote this evening at the court. You will attend, Blushweaver, and you will cast your vote in favor of the reformist arguments.”

 With that, he left them.

 “I feel like we just got manipulated,” Lightsong said. “It’s a very curious feeling. A little like being stepped on, only without so much foot odor.”

 Blushweaver snorted. “We only got manipulated, my dear, if he’s right and there isn’t war. If there is, then we may have just set ourselves up to save the entire Court--perhaps the kingdom itself.”

 “How very altruistic of us,” Lightsong said.

 “We’re like that,” Blushweaver said as the servants returned. “So selfless it’s painful at times. Either way, that means we have two of the four sets of Commands.”

 “Mine and Hopefinder’s?”

 “Actually,” she said, “I was speaking of Hopefinder’s and Mercystar’s. She confided hers to me yesterday, all the while talking about how comforting she found it that you’d taken a personal interest in the incident surrounding her palace. That was very well done, by the way. She spoke about your thorough investigation and the like.”

 She seemed to be fishing for something. Lightsong smiled. “No, I didn’t know that would encourage her to release her Commands to you. I was just curious.”

 “Curious about a murdered servant?”

 “Actually, yes,” Lightsong said. “Some of us, my dear, consider ourselves Gods to this people. The death of a servant of the Returned is quite disconcerting, particularly in the proximity of our own palaces.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow.

 “Would I lie to you?” Lightsong asked.

 “Only every time you claim you don’t want to sleep with me. Lies, brazen lies. I can see it in your expression.”

 “Innuendo again, my dear?”

 “Of course not,” she said. “That one was hardly innuendo--it was quite flagrant. Regardless, I know that you are lying about that investigation, too. What was the real purpose of it?”

 Lightsong paused, then sighed, shaking his head, waving for servant to bring back the fruit--he liked that better. “I don’t know, Blushweaver. In all honesty, I’m beginning to wonder if I might have been a kind of officer of the law in my previous life.”

 She frowned.

 “You know, like city watch. I was extremely good at interrogating those servants. At least, in my own humble opinion.”

 “Which we’ve already established is quite altruistic.”

 “Quite,” he agreed. “I think it’s true. I was an officer of the law. That would explain how I ended up dying in a way that made people call me Lightsong the Bold.”

 Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “I just always assumed you were found in bed with a much younger woman, and her father killed you. Seems far more bold than dying from stab wounds while trying to catch some petty thief.”

 “Your mockery slides right off of my altruistic humility,” Lightsong said lightly.

 “Ah, indeed. You should probably have been named God of “putting up with Blushweaver” for your heroics.”

 “Either way,” Lightsong said, eating another chunk of pineapple. “I was a sheriff or investigator of some kind. I’ll bet that if I ever got my hands on a sword, I’d prove one of the best duelists this city has ever seen.”

 She regarded him for a moment. “You’re serious,” she said.

 “Dead serious. Dead as a squirrel serious.”

 She paused.

 “Personal joke,” he said, sighing. “But yes, I believe it, Blushweaver. Though, there’s one thing I can’t figure out.”

 “And that is?”

 “How juggling lemons fits into it all.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-two

 “Okay, now, why is it you want to have this meeting?” Denth walked with her, Tonk Fah, Jewels, and Clod. Peprin had stayed behind at Vivenna’s request.

 “They’re my people, Denth” Vivenna said.

 “So?” he asked. They had left the busy market streets behind, and were headed toward the slums. “Princess, mercenaries are my people, and you don’t see me spending that much time with them. They’re a smelly, annoying lot.”

 “Not to mention rude,” Tonk Fah added.

 Vivenna rolled her eyes. “Denth, I’m their princess. I need to meet with them, comfort them. Besides, you yourself said that they were influential.”

 “Their leaders are,” Denth said. “And they’d be perfectly happy to meet with you on neutral ground. Going into the slums themselves isn’t necessary--the common people, they really aren’t all that important.”

 She eyed him. “That,” she said, “is the difference between Hallandrens and Idrians. We pay attention to our people.”

 Behind, Jewels snorted in derision.

 “I’m not Hallandren,” Denth noted. However, he let the statement drop as they approached the slums. Vivenna had to admit, as they grew close, she did feel a little more apprehensive. This was different from the safe house she had visited with Denth and the others.

 This. . .this slum felt different. Darker, somehow. It had a distinct feeling, separate from T’Telir proper--something more than just the run-down shops and unrepaired streets. Small groups of men stood on street corners, watching her with suspicious eyes. Every once in a while, Vivenna would catch a glimpse of a building with women in very revealing clothing--even for Hallandren--hanging about the front, and some even whistled toward Denth and Tonk Fah.

 This was a foreign place. Everywhere else in T’Telir, she felt like she didn’t fit in. But here, she felt unwelcome. Distrusted. Even hated.

 Still, she steeled herself. Somewhere in this place were a group of tired, overworked, frightened Idrians. The threatening atmosphere made her feel even more sorry for her people, more determined to give them hope. She didn’t know if they would be much help in trying to sabotage the Hallandren war effort, but she did know one thing.

 Idris had failed some of her people. She intended to find them and do a better job for them than had been done in the past. If people had slipped through the monarchy’s fingers, then it was her duty to try and pick them back up.

 “That look on your face,” Denth said. “What’s it for?”

 “I’m worried about my people,” she said, shivering as they passed a large group of street toughs dressed in black with red arm-bands, their faces stained and dirtied. “I came by this slum when Peprin and I were searching for a new home--we were still looking for something cheaper then. I. . .I didn’t want to get close, even though I’d heard that prices were cheap. I could tell it was dangerous even from the outside. I can’t believe that my people are so oppressed that they would have to live somewhere in here, surrounded by all of this.”

 Denth looked at her, frowning. “Surrounded by it?”

 Vivenna nodded. “Living among prostitutes and gangs, having to walk past such things every day. . . .”

 Denth started laughing, startling her. “Princess,” he said, “your people don’t live among prostitutes and gangs. Your people are the prostitutes and gangs.”

 Vivenna stopped in the middle of the street. “What?”

 Denth glanced back at her. “This is the Idrian quarter of the city. These slums are called the Highlands, for Color’s sake.”

 “Impossible,” she snapped.

 “Very possible,” Denth replied. “Immigrants gather, princess. I’ve seen it in cities across the world. They make a little enclave, and that enclave tends to be conveniently ignored by the rest of the city. When roads are repaired, other places come first. When guards are sent to patrol, they avoid the foregin sections.”

 “The slum becomes its own little world,” Tonk Fah said, walking up beside her. “A world that changes its people.”

 “Everyone you pass in here is an Idrian,” Denth said, waving for her to keep walking. “There’s a reason they have a bad reputation in the rest of the city.”

 Vivenna felt a numb chill. No, she thought. No, it’s not possible.

 And yet, as she walked, she began to see some signs. Symbols of Austre placed--unobtrusive by intention--in the corners of windowsills or on doorsteps. People in grays and whites. Mementoes of the highlands in the form of shepherd’s caps on the occasional child. Objects made of pine timber hanging in windows.

 And yet, if this people were of Idris, then they’d been completely corrupted. Colors marred many of their costumes, not to mention the air of danger and unwelcomeness they gave off. And, how could any Idrian even think of becoming a prostitute?

 Finally, she just looked down. “It’s true, isn’t it?” she asked of Denth, walking beside her.

 “Yes.”

 “I. . .don’t understand. We are a peaceful people, Denth. A people of mountain villages. We are open. Friendly.”

 “That kind doesn’t last long in a slum. They change. Or they get beaten down.”

 Vivenna shivered, feeling a stab of anger at Hallandren. They did this to my people, she thought as Denth led her around a corner, toward the meeting place.

 I could have forgiven the Hallandren for making my people poor, she thought. But this? This is ten times as horrible. Who could forgive this? They’ve made thugs and thieves out of caring shepherds. They’ve turned modest women into prostitutes and our children to urchins.

 She knew she shouldn’t let herself grow arrogantly angry. And yet, she had to grit her teeth and work very, very hard to keep her hair from bleeding to a smoldering red. The images sparked something within her. Something she consistently avoided thinking about. Something dangerous.

 Hallandren has ruined these people. Just like it ruined me by dominating my childhood, by forcing me to honor the opportunity to be taken and raped in the name of protecting my country.

 I hate this city. Hate it so very much.

 They were unseemly thoughts. She stuffed them away, keeping her hair black, forcing herself to remain calm. She couldn’t afford to hate Hallandren. She had been told that on many occasions.

 She had trouble lately remembering reasons why.

 Still, she suceeded in keeping her hatred contained. A few moments later, Thame met up with them, leading them the rest of the distance. She had been told they would be meeting in a large park, but as they grew near, Vivenna saw that the term ‘park’ had been used loosely. The plot of land was barren and strewn with garbage. She would have called it a field, except it was surrounded on all sides by buildings. It looked like one of the other city gounds might have, if they had been left to grow wild for a few years, then strewn with a poison to leave all of the plants brown.

 Her group paused at the edge of the dead garden, waiting as Thame went ahead. People had gathered in the area--dozens of them, as Thame had promised. Most were of the same type that she had seen in the city. Men wearing dark, ominous colors and flippant expressions. Youthful street toughs. Women in the garb of prostitutes. Some older people, who seemed a little less threatening.

 Vivenna tried to force out a smile for them, but it felt weak, even to her. For their benefit, she changed her hair color--not to red, to suit the anger she still felt, but to yellow. The color of happiness and excitement.

 The people muttered among themselves. As they did so, Thame returned and waived her forward.

 “Wait,” Vivenna said. “I wanted to talk to the common people before we meet with the leaders.”

 Thame shrugged. “If you want. . . .”

 Vivenna stepped forward. “People of Idris,” she said. “I’ve come to offer you comfort and hope.”

 The people continued to talk among themselves. Very few seemed to pay any attention to her at all. Not all of them were thugs, but even those who weren’t sat in their own groups of workers, regarding the others with distrust.

 Vivenna swallowed. “I know that you’ve had hard lives. But, I want to promise you that the king does care for you and support you. I will find a way to bring you home.”

 “Home?” one of the men said. “Back to the highlands?”

 Vivenna nodded.

 Several people snorted at that comment, and a few trailed away from the garden. Vivenna watched them go with concern.

 “Wait,” she said. “Don’t you want to hear me? I bring news from your king.”

 The people ignored her.

 “Most of them just wanted confirmation that you were who you said, your highness,” Thame said quietly.

 Vivenna turned back toward the groups still talking quietly in the garden. “Your lives can get better,” she promised. “I will see you cared for.”

 “Our lives are already better,” one of the men said. “There is nothing for us in the highlands. I earn twice as much here as I did back there.”

 Vivenna fell silent. Others were nodding in agreement.

 “Why did they even come?” she whispered.

 “I told you, princess,” Thame said. “They’re patriots--they believe in being Idrian. City Idrians. We stick together, we do. You being here. . .it means something to them, don’t worry. They may seem indifferent, but they’ll do anything to get back at the Hallandrens for being so prejudiced against them.”

 Vivenna fell silent.

 Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought, growing even more deeply angered. These people aren’t even Idrians any more. In a way, they were worse than the Hallandrens. How could they have so given up their national identity? Thame called them ‘patriots,’ but all she saw was a group held together only because they were forced to.

 She shook her head, giving up on her speech. These people were not interested in hope or comfort. They only watned to get back at their oppressors. She could use that, perhaps, but it made her feel dirty to even think about it.

 Thame led her and the others down a pathway beaten into the field of weeds and trash. Near the back of the garden, they found a wide construction that was partially a service shack, partially a wooden pavilion. Inside, visible through the open doorways on the sides, she could see the leaders waiting.

 There were three of them, each with his own compliment of bodyguards. The leaders wore rich, vibrant T’Telir colors. Slum lords.

 Vivenna felt her stomach twist. All three of the men had at least the First Heightening. One of them had obtained the Third.

 Jewels and Clod took up places outside the building, guarding Vivenna’s escape route. Inside, Vivenna sat in the chair arranged for her. Denth and Tonk Fah took up protective places behind her.

 Vivenna regarded the slum lords. All three of them were variations on the same theme. The one on the left looked comfortable in his rich clothing. The one on the right looked a little more scraggly. The one in the center seemed the indulgent type. He was a little sloppy--but in a purposeful way, perhaps because it was a nice accent to his handsome, youthful face.

 The room was still.

 “I’m not sure what to say to you,” Vivenna finally said. “I came expecting to find something that doesn’t exist. I was hoping that the people still cared about their heritage.”

 The sloppy one in the middle leaned forward. This would probably be Rira, Thame’s employer. “You’re our princess,” he said. He seemed earnest. “Daughter of our king. We care about that.”

 “Kind of,” the one in the neat outfit said.

 “Really, princess,” Rira said. “We’re honored to meet with you. And curious at your intentions in our city. You’ve been making quite a stir.”

 Vivenna regarded them with a flat expression. Finally, she sighed. “You all know that war is coming.”

 Rira nodded. The more scraggly man on the right, however, shook his head. “I’m not convinced there will be war. Not yet.”

 “It is coming,” Vivenna said sharply. “I promise you that. My intentions in this city, therefore, are to make certain that the war goes as well for Idris as possible.”

 “And what would that entail?” the scraggly man asked. “A Royal on the throne of Hallandren?”

 Vivenna paused. Was that what she wanted? “I just want our people to survive the attack.”

 “A weak middle ground,” said the man on the left. “Wars are fought to be won, your highness. The Hallandrens have Lifeless. Beat them, and they’ll just attack with more later. I think that an Idris military presence in the city would be an absolute necessity if you wanted to bring our homeland freedom.”

 Vivenna frowned.

 “You think to overthrow the city?” asked the man on the right. “If you do, what do we get out of it?”

 “I just want to bring the people some hope,” Vivenna said. Or, at least, I did. . . .

 “Hope?” asked the man on the left. “Who cares about hope? I want promises. What do we gain if Idris survives? Will titles be handed out? Who gets the trade contracts?”

 “You have a sister,” Rira said. “A third one, unmarried. Is her hand bargainable? Royal blood could gain my support for your war.”

 Vivenna’s stomach twisted. “Gentlemen,” she said in her diplomat’s voice, “this is not about seeking personal gain. This is about patriotism.”

 “Of course, of course,” Rira said. “But, patriots should earn rewards. Right?”

 All three looked at her expectantly. Vivenna stood up. “I will be going, now,” she said.

 Denth, looking surprised, laid a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure?” he asked. “It took quite a bit of effort to set up this meeting.”

 “I have been willing to work with thugs and thieves, Denth,” she said quietly. “But seeing them of my own people is too hard. This people have lost their Idrian selves. I don’t know that I care to work with them.”

 “You judge us quickly, princess,” Rira said from behind, laughing a bit. “Don’t tell me that you didn’t expect this?”

 She paused. “Expecting something is different from seeing it first hand. I expected you three. I didn’t expect to see what had happened to our people.”

 “And the Five Visions?” Rira, still sounding amused. “You sweep in here, judge us beneath you, then sweep away? That’s not very Idrian of you.”

 She turned back toward the men. The one on the right had already stood and was gathering his bodyguards to go, grumbling about the ‘waste of time.’

 “What do you know of being Idrian?” she snapped. “Where is your obedience of Austre?”

 Rira reached beneath his shirt, pulling out a small white disc, inscribed with his parents names. An Austrin charm of obedience. “My father brought me down here from the highlands, princess. He died working the Edgli fields in the jungle. I’ve pulled myself up by the pain of my scraped, bleeding hands, working hard to make something of myself. Working hard to make things better for your people.”

 “You wear colors,” she snapped. “And you make prostitutes of housewives.”

 “I live,” he said. “And I make sure that everyone else has enough food. Will you do better for them?”

 Vivenna frowned. “I. . . .”

 She trailed off as she heard the screams. She stood for a moment, confused, her BioChromatic senses giving her a good feeling for the people behind her. She felt an anxiety.

 She turned as the slum lords cursed, standing. Outside, through the garden, she saw something terrible. Purple and yellow uniforms on hulking men with grey faces.

 Lifeless guards.

 People scattered, screaming as the Lifeless tromped into the garden, being led by a number of uniformed city guards. Denth cursed, shoving Vivenna to the side. “Run!” he said, whipping his sword free.

 “But--”

 Tonk Fah grabbed her arm, towing her out of the building as Denth charged the guards. The slum lords and their people were scattering, though the city guard were quickly moving to cut off exits.

 Tonk Fah cursed, pulling Vivenna into a small alleyway at the back of the garden.

 “What’s going on?” she asked, heart thumping.

 “Raid,” Tonk Fah said. “Shouldn’t be too dangerous, unless. . . .”

 Screaming started, and blades sounded, metal clashing against metal. Tonk Fah paused, looking grim, and Vivenna glanced backward. The men from the slum lords’ groups, feeling trapped, had engaged the Lifeless.

 Vivenna felt a sense of horror, watching the terrible, grey faced men wade amongst the swords and daggers, ignoring wounds. The creatures pulled out their weapons and began to attack. Men yelled, falling, bloody.

 Denth moved over to defend the mouth of Vivenna’s alleyway. She didn’t know where Jewels had gone.

 “Aw, Colors,” Tonk Fah said, shoving her in front of him. “Fools decided to resist. Now we’re in trouble.”

 “But how did they find us!” she asked.

 “Don’t know,” he said. “Don’t care. Might be after you. Might just be after those slum lords. I hope we never find out. Keep moving!”

 Vivenna obeyed, rushing down the dark alleyway, trying to keep from tripping on her long dress. It proved very impractical to run in, and Tonk Fah kept shooing her forward, looking back anxiously. She heard grunts and echoing yells, and a glance over her shoulder showed Denth fighting with something back at the mouth of the alleyway.

 Vivenna and Tonk Fah burst out of the alleyway. There, standing in the street waiting, was a group of five Lifeless. Vivenna lurched to a halt, and Tonk Fah cursed.

 The Lifeless stood, as if stone, their expressions eerily grim in the waning light. Tonk Fah glanced backward, obviously decided that Denth wasn’t going to be arriving anytime soon, then resignedly held his hands up. “I can’t take five on my own, princess,” he whispered. “Not Lifeless. We’ll have to let them arrest us.”

 Vivenna slowly held her hands up as well.

 The Lifeless pulled out their weapons.

 “Uh. . . .” Tonk Fah said. “We surrender?”

 The creatures charged.

 “Run!” he shouted, pulling free his weapon.

 Vivenna stumbled to the side, as several of the lifeless charged Tonk Fah. She scrambled to her feet, moving as quickly as she could, dashing away. Tonk Fah tried to follow behind, but had to stop to defend himself. She slowed, glancing back in time to see him ram his dueling blade through the neck of a Lifeless.

 The creature gushed something that was not blood. Three others got around Tonk Fah, though he did manage to whip his blade to the side, taking one in the back of the leg. It fell to the cobbles.

 Two ran toward her.

 Vivenna watched them come, mind numb. Should she stay? Try to help. . . .

 Help how? Something screamed within her. Something visceral and primal. Run!

 And she did. She dashed away, going as quickly as she could, taking the first corner she saw, ducking into an alleyway. She raced for the other side, but in her haste, she tripped on her skirt.

 She hit the cobblestones roughly, crying out, rolling. She heard footsteps behind her, and she cried out, ignoring her bruised elbow as she quickly pulled her skirt offf, leaving only her dressing leggings. She scrambled to her feet, yelling for help.

 Something darkened the other end of the alleyway. A hulking figure in bright colors and grey skin. Vivenna stopped, then spun.

 The other two entered the alleyway behind her. She backed against the wall, feeling suddenly cold. Shocked.

 Austre, God of Colors, she thought, trembling. Please. . . .

 The Lifeless advanced on her, moving quickly, weapons out. She looked down. A bit of rope, frayed but still useful, sat in the refuse beside her discarded green skirt.

 Like everything else, the rope called to her. As if it felt like it should still live. She couldn’t sense the Lifeless bearing down on her, but ironically, she felt as if she could sense the rope. Could imagine it, twisting around legs, tying the creatures up, keeping them from killing her.

 Those Breaths you hold, Denth had said. They’re a tool. Almost priceless. Certainly powerful. . . .

 She glanced back at the Lifeless, with their inhumanly human eyes, their grey faces. She felt her heart thumping so hard it felt like someone was pounding on her chest. She watched them approach.

 And saw her death reflected in their unfeeling eyes.

 Tears on her face, trembling, she fell to her knees, desperately grabbing rope and skirt. She knew the mechanics. Her tutors had trained her.

 “Come to life,” she plead of the rope. “Save me. Protect me.”

 Nothing happened.

 She knew the mechanics, but that obviously wasn’t enough. She wept, eyes blurry. “Please,” she begged. “Please.”

 The first Lifeless reached her--the one who had cut her off at the other end of the alleyway. She cringed, cowering to the dirty street.

 And the creature fell to the ground, suddenly, jerking. She looked up with shock as someone jumped over her, then slammed his weapon into one of the other creatures as they arrived. Vivenna blinked her eyes clear, and only then did she recognize the newcomer.

 Not Denth. Not Tonk Fah. A creature with skin as grey as that of the men attacking her. Clod.

 He expertly took off the head of his first opponent, wielding his thick-bladed sword. Something clear sprayed from the neck of the beheaded creature as it fell backward, tumbling to the ground, killed--apparently--like any man would have been.

 Clod blocked an attack from the second Lifeless guard. Behind, in the mouth of the alleyway, two more Lifeless appeared. They charged as Clod backed up, firmly planting one foot on either side of Vivenna, his sword held before him. It dripped clear liquid.

 The remaning lifeless guard waited for the other two to approach. Vivenna trembled, to tired--too numb--to run. She glanced upward, and saw something almost human in Clod’s eyes as he raised his sword against the three. It was the first emotion she’d seen in any Lifeless, though she might have mistaken it.

 Determination.

 The three attacked. She had assumed--in her ignorance back in Idris--that Lifeless were like decaying skeletons or corpses. She’d imagined them attacking in waves, lacking skill, but having relentless, dark power.

 She’d been wrong. These creatures moved with skill and coordination, like a human might. Except, there was no speaking. No grunting. Just silence as Clod fended off one attack, then rammed his elbow into the face of a second Lifeless. He moved with a fluidity she had rarely seen, his skill matching the brief moment of dazzling speed that Denth had displayed in the restaurant.

 Clod whipped his sword around and took the third Lifeless in the leg. One of the guards, however, ramming his blade through Clod’s stomach. Something clear squirted out both sides, spraying Vivenna. However, Clod didn’t even grunt as he brought his weapon around and took off a second head.

 The Lifeless guard died, falling to the ground and leaving his weapon sticking from Clod’s chest. One of the other guards stumbled back, leg bleeding something clear, and then fell backward to the ground. Clod efficiently turned his attention to the last Lifeless, which did not retreat, but took an obviously defensive stance.

 The stance didn’t help. Clod took the last one down in a matter of seconds. Then, he efficiently rammed his blade through the neck of the fallen creature, stopping it from trying to crawl toward Vivenna, a knife in its hand.

 The alleyway fell still. Clod turned toward her, eyes lacking emotion. Then, he began to twitch. He shook his head, as if trying to clear his vision. An awful lot of clear liquid was pouring from his chest. He placed one hand against the wall, then slumped to his knees, trembling.

 Vivenna paused, then reached out a hand toward him.

 A shadow moved on the other side of the alleyway. She looked up, apprehensively, still in shock.

 “Aw, Colors,” Tonk Fah said, running forward, outfit wet with clear liquid. “Denth! She’s here!” He knelt down beside Vivenna. “You okay?”

 She nodded dully, only barely aware that she was still holding her skirt in one hand. That meant her legs--all the way up to her thighs and the short dressing leggings she now wore--were exposed. She couldn’t find it in herself to care. Nor did she care that her hair was bleached white. She just stared at Clod, who knelt before her, head bowed, as if worshiping at some strange alter. His weapons slipped from his twitching fingers and clanged to the cobbles.

 Tonk Fah followed her gaze, looking at Clod. “Yeah,” he said. “Jewels is not going to be pleased. Come on, we need to get out of here.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-Three

 He was always gone when Siri awoke.

 She lay in the deep, well-stuffed bed, morning light streaming through the window onto the wall opposite her. Already, the day was growing warm, and even her single sheet was too hot. She threw it off, but remained lying on the bed, looking up at the ceiling.

 She could tell from the sunlight that it was nearly noon. She and Susebron tended to stay up quite late, talking. That was probably a good thing. Those watching might see that she was getting up later and later each morning, and think that it was due to. . .other activities.

 She stretched. At first, it had been strange to communicate with the God King in their odd way, with one of them writing and the other talking. Yet, as the days progressed, it was feeling more and more natural to her. She found his writing--uncertain, unpracticed letters that explained such interesting thoughts--to be endearing. If he spoke, she suspected that his voice would be quiet and kindly. He was so tender. She’d never have expected that.

 She smiled, sinking back into her pillow, idly wishing for him to still be there when she awoke. Waiting for her, in the morning.

 She was happy. That, also, was something she’d never expected from Hallandren. She did miss the highlands, and there were plenty of things that bothered her about the palace. Her inability to leave the Court of Gods was a big one. Then, there was the fact that she was always being watched by servants and priests, not to mention the politics.

 And yet, there were other things. Marvelous things. The brilliant colors, the performers, the sheer overwhelming experience of T’Telir. And, there was the opportunity to speak with Susebron each night. The opportunity to hear his odd ideas, expressed with an intelligent naiveté.

 He treated her differently than anyone ever had before. Before, her brashness had been such a shame to her people and her family. Yet, Susebron seemed to find it fascinating, even alluring.

 She smiled again, letting herself dream for a few moments longer. However, as she did, real life began to intrude.

 Susebron was in danger. Real, serious danger. The thought loomed over her, dampening her happiness. He refused to believe that his priests could bear him any sort of malice or threat. That same innocence which made him so interesting was also a terrible liability.

 But what to do? Nobody else knew of his predicament. Really, there was only one person who could help him. That person, unfortunately, wasn’t up to the task. She had ignored her lessons, and had come to her fate wholly unprepared.

 So what? a part of her mind whispered.

 Siri frowned, staring at the ceiling. She found it hard, this time, to summon her shame at having ignored her lessons. She’d made a mistake, true. But, what could she do about it now? How much time was she going to spend moping around, annoyed at herself for something done and gone?

 All right, she told herself. Enough complaining. Enough excuses. I might not have prepared as well as I should, but I’m here, now, and I need to do something.

 Because nobody else will.

 She climbed out of bed, running fingers through her long hair. Susebron liked it long--he found it fascinating, like her serving women did. And, with them to help her care for it, the length was almost worth the trouble.

 She folded her arms, wearing only her shift, walking through the room. What could she do? What were her resources? She couldn’t continue to stumble around like a bumpkin from the wilderness.

 She needed to play their game. She hated thinking of it that way. “Game” implied small stakes. This was no game. It was the God King’s life, perhaps her own life, that was being threatened.

 She searched through her memory, dredging up what scraps she could from her lessons. Politics was about exchanges, she remembered. About giving what you had--or what you implied that you had--in order to gain more. It was like being a merchant. You started with a certain stock, and by the end of the year, you hoped to have increased that stock.

 Don’t make too many waves until you’re ready to strike, Lightsong had told her. Don’t appear too innocent, but don’t appear too smart either. Be average.

 She paused beside the bed, then gathered up the bed sheets and towed them over to the smoldering fire to burn them, as was her daily chore.

 Exchanges, she thought, watching the sheets catch fire in the large hearth. What do I have to trade or exchange? Not much.

 It would have to do.

 She walked over to the door, pulling it open. As usual, a group of serving women waited outside. Siri’s standard ladies moved around her, bringing clothing. Another group of servants, however, moved to tidy the room. Several of these wore brown.

 As her servants dressed her, she watched one of the girls in brown. At a convenient moment, Siri stepped over, putting a hand on the girl’s shoulder. The servant looked up in surprise.

 “You’re from Pahn Kahl,” Siri said quietly.

 The girl nodded.

 “I have a message I want you to give to Bluefingers,” Siri whispered. “Tell him I have vital information he needs to know. I’d like to trade. Tell him. . .it could change his plans drastically.”

 The girl paled, but nodded, and Siri stepped back to continue dressing. Several of the other serving women had heard the exchange, but from what she’d been able to determine, the servants were accustomed to the machinations of their superiors. They were supposed to stay out of politics, and it was a sacret tenet of the Hallandren religion that the servants of a god weren’t to repeat or betray the things they heard in confidence.

 Hopefully, that would hold true for Siri. If it didn’t, then she hadn’t really given that much away by talking to the girl in brown.

 Now she just had to decide just what ‘vital information’ she had, and why exactly Bluefingers should care about it.

#

 “My dear queen!” Lightsong said, actually going so far as to embrace Siri as she stepped into his pavilion at the arena.

 Siri smiled to herself as Lightsong waved for her to seat herself in one of his couch-like chairs, meant for lounging back in a reclining position. Siri sat with care--she was growing to favor the intricate Hallandren gowns, but moving about in them took quite a bit of skill. As she settled, Lightsong called for fruit to be brought.

 “You treat me too kindly,” Siri said.

 “Nonsense,” Lightsong said. “You’re my queen! Besides, you remind me of someone of whom I was very fond.”

 “And who is that?”

 “I honestly have no idea,” Lightsong said, accepting a plate of sliced grapes, then handing them to Siri.

 Siri raised an eyebrow, but she knew by now not to encourage him. Or, at least, not to encourage him too much. “Tell me,” she asked, using a little wooden spear to eat her grape slices. “Why do they call you Lightsong the Bold?”

 “There is an easy answer to that one, my dear,” he said, leaning back. “It is because of all the Gods, only I am bold enough to act like a complete idiot.”

 Siri raised an eyebrow.

 “My station requires true courage,” he continued. “For, you see, I am actually quite a solemn and boring person. At nights my fondest desire is to sit and count the rocks in various piles beside my bed. However, alas, I cannot. Because of my courage, I go out each evening and abandon my rocks in favor of socializing with the other members of the pantheon.”

 “Why does that take courage?”

 He looked at her. “My dear. Have you seen how dreadfully annoying the rest of them are?”

 Siri laughed. “No, really,” she said. “Where did the name come from?”

 “It’s a complete misnomer,” Lightsong said. “Obviously you’re intelligent enough to determine that. Our names and titles are assigned randomly by a small monkey who has been fed an exceedingly large amount of gin.”

 “Now you’re just being silly.”

 “Now?” Lightsong asked. “Now?” he raised a cup of wine toward her. “My dear, I am always silly. You retract that statement at once!”

 Siri just shook her head, turning back to her grapes. Lightsong, it appeared, was in rare form this afternoon. Great, she thought. My husband is in danger of being murdered by unknown forces, and my only allies are a scribe who’s afraid of me and a God who makes no sense.

 “It has to do with death,” Lightsong finally said as the priests began to file into the arena floor below for this day’s round of arguments.

 Siri looked toward him.

 “All men die,” Lightsong said. “Some, however, die in ways that exemplify a particular attribute or emotion. They show a bit of something greater than mankind. Something powerful, something divine. That is what is said to bring us back.”

 He fell silent.

 “You died showing great bravery, then?” Siri asked.

 “Apparently,” he said, shrugging. “I really don’t know for certain. Perhaps I insulted a very large panther. That sounds rather brave, don’t you think?”

 “You don’t know how you died?”

 He shook his head. “We forget,” he said. “Everything from our past. We awake without memories. I don’t even know who I was or what my job was.”

 Siri smiled. “I suspect that you were a negotiator or a salesman of some sort. Something that required you to talk a lot, but to say very little!”

 “Yes,” he said quietly, seeming unlike himself as he stared out at the priests. “Yes, I suspect that was it exactly. . . .”

 He paused, then shook his head and smiled at her. “Regardless, my dear queen, I have provided a surprise for you this day!”

 She glanced to the side. Do I want to be surprised by Lightsong? She glanced about nervously.

 He laughed. “No need to fear,” he said. “My surprises rarely cause bodily harm--at least, not on even numbered days.” He waved his hand, and an elderly man with an exaggeratedly long white beard approached.

 Siri frowned.

 “This is Dust,” Lightsong said. “Master storyteller. I believe you had some questions you wished to ask. . . .”

 Siri smiled eagerly, but glanced at the priests below. “Um, shouldn’t we be paying attention to the speeches?”

 Lightsong waved indifferently. “Pay attention? Ridiculous! That would be far too responsible of us. We’re Gods, for the Colors’ sake. Or, well, I am. You’re close enough. A God-in-law, one might say. Anyway, do you really want to listen to a bunch of stuffy priests talk about sewage disposal?”

 Siri grimaced.

 “I thought not. Besides, neither of us have votes pertaining to this issue. So, let us spend our time wisely. We never know when we will run out!”

 “Of time?” Siri asked. “Aren’t you immortal?”

 “Not of time,” Lightsong said, holding up his plate. “Of grapes. I hate listening to storytellers without grapes. Dreadful experience.”

 Siri rolled her eyes, but continued to eat the grape slices. The storyteller waited patiently. As she looked closer, she could tell that he wasn’t quite as old as he appeared at first glance. The beard was obviously something of a uniform for him, and while it didn’t seem fake, she suspected that it had been bleached to make him look more aged.

 Still, she doubted Lightsong would have settled for anyone other than the absolute best. She settled back in her chair--which, she noticed, had been crafted for someone of her size.

 I should be careful with my questions, she thought. I can’t ask directly about the deaths of the old God Kings; that would be too obvious. What, then, would be natural for a person in my position to learn about?

 “Storyteller,” she said, leaning forward slightly. “What do you know of Hallandren history?”

 “Much, my queen,” he said, bowing his head.

 “Tell me of the days before the division between Idris and Hallandren.”

 “Ah,” the man said, reaching into a pocket. He pulled out a handful of sand and began to rub it between his fingers, letting it drop in a soft stream toward the ground, its grains blown slightly in the wind. “Her majesty wishes one of the deep stories, from long before. A story before time began?”

 “I wish to know the origins of the Hallandren God Kings,” Siri said.

 “Then it is good we begin in the distant haze,” the storyteller said, bringing up another hand, letting black powdery sand drop from it, mixing with the sand that fell from his other hand. As Siri watched, it turned white, and she cocked her head, smiling at the display.

 “The first God King of Hallandren is ancient,” Dust said, and she could now see where he got his name. “Ancient, yes. Older than kingdoms and cities, older than monarchs and religions. Not older than the mountains, however, for they were already here. Like the knuckles of the sleeping giants below, they formed this valley, where panthers made their home, and beasts were strange.

 “People speak of the valley then, a place before it had a name. During those days, the people of Chedesh were dominant, though their empire has long since been taken by the sands. They sailed the inner sea, coming from the east, and it was they who first discovered this strange land. Their writings are sparse, but memory remains. Perhaps you can imagine their surprise at discovering a place such at this? A place with beaches of sand, with fruits aplenty, and with strange, alien forests?”

 Dust reached into his robes and pulled out a handful of something else. He began to drop it before him--bright green leaves from the fronds of a fern.

 “Paradise, they called it,” Dust whispered. “A paradise hidden between the mountains, a land with pleasant rains that never grew cold, a land where the earth spit forth succulent food with very little effort.” He threw the handful of leaves into the air, and in the center of them puffed a burst of colorful dust. Deep reds and blues mixed in the air, blowing before him.

 “A land of color,” he said. “Because of the Tears of Edgli, the flowers of such brilliant beauty that their dyes would hold fast in any cloth.”

 Siri sat thoughtfully. She’d never really though about how Hallandren would look to people who came across the inner sea. She’d heard stories from the ramblemen who came into Idris, and they spoke of the lands on the other side of the mountains and the other side of the sea. Those lands were much more like Idris than they were like Hallandren. In other lands, one found praries and stepps, mountains and deserts. But not jungles. Hallandren was unique.

 “The First Returned was born during this time,” Dust said, sprinkling a handful of silver glitter into the air before him. “Aboard a ship that was sailing the coast of the land. Returned can now be found in all parts of the land, but the first one--the man whom we name only by his title--was born here. In the waters of this very bay. He reported the Five Visions. Then, he died a week later.

 “The men of his ship founded a kingdom upon these beaches--then called Hanald. Before they arrived, all that had existed upon these jungles was the small kingdom of Pahn Kahl, more of a collection of fishing villages than a true kingdom.”

 The glitter ran out, and Dust began to drop a powdery brown dirt from his other hand as he reached into another pocket. “Now, you may wonder why I must travel back so far to speak of what led to Hallandren. Should I not speak of the Manywar, of the shattering of kingdoms, of the Five Scholars and the Klad the Usurper? Those are the events we focus upon, the ones men know the best. To talk only of them is to ignore the history of three hundred years that led up to them.

 “Would there have been a Manywar without knowledge of the Returned? It was a Returned, after all, who predicted the Manywar and prompted Strifelover to attack the kingdoms across the mountains.”

 Siri paused, frowning. “Strifelover?” she said.

 “Yes, your majesty,” the man said, switching to a black dust. “Strifelover. It is another name for Klad the Usurper.”

 “That sounds like the name of a Returned.”

 Dust nodded. “Indeed,” he said. “Klad was Returned, as was Peacegiver, the man who overthrew him and founded Hallandren. We haven’t arrived at that part yet. We are still back in Hanald, the outpost-become-kingdom founded by the men of the First Returned’s crew. They were the ones who placed the First Returned’s wife as their queen, then used their knowledge of the Tears of Edgli to create fantastic dyes which sold for untold riches across the world. People flooded into the new kingdom, and the former sailors put them to work, quickly crafting a kingdom.”

 He removed a handful of flower petals and began to let them fall before him. “The Tears of Edgli. The source of Hallandren wealth. Such small things, and so easy to grow here. And yet, this is the only place where they will grow. In other parts of the world, dyes are very difficult to obtain. Expensive. Some scholars say that the Manywar was fought over these little flower petals, that the kingdoms of Kuth and Huth were destroyed simply because of these little drips of color.”

 The petals fell to the floor.

 “But only some of the scholars say that, storyteller?” Lightsong said. Siri turned, glancing at him, almost having forgotten that he was watching. “What do the rest say? Why was the Manywar fought in their minds?”

 The storyteller fell silent for a moment. And then, he pulled out two handfuls and began to release dust of a half-dozen different colors. “Breath, your grace. Most agree that the Manywar was not simply about the money from plants squeezed dry, but instead about a much greater prize. That of people squeezed dry.

 “You know, perhaps, that the royal family was growing increasingly interested in the process by which Breath could be used to bring objects to life. Awakening, it was being called. Yet, it was a fresh and newly-understood art, then. It still is, in many ways. The workings of the souls of men, their power to make simple clumps of dirt and flesh become living people, is something barely discovered some four centuries ago. That is a short time, according to the accounting of Gods.”

 “Unlike a court proceeding,” Lightsong mumbled, glancing over at the priests who were still talking about sanitations. “Those seem to last an eternity, according to the accounting of Gods.”

 The storyteller didn’t break stride at the interruption. “Breath. The years leading up to the Manywar were the years of the Five Scholars, and the discovery of new Commands. To some, this was a time of great enlightenment and learning. Others call them the darkest days of men, for it was the day that we best learned to exploit one another.”

 He began to drop two handfuls of dust, one bright yellow, the other black. Siri watched, amused. He seemed to be slanting what he said toward her, careful not to offend her Idris sensibilities.

 But, what did she really know of Breath? Lightsong had a lot of it--she could tell by the way that colors grew more vibrant around him. But, she’d rarely even seen any Awakeners in the Court. Even when she did, she didn’t really care. The monks had spoken against such things, but, well, she had paid about as much attention to them as she had her tutors.

 “One of the Five Scholars made a discovery,” Dust continued, pulling out some white scraps, made of scrunched up pieces of paper with writing on them. “Commands. Methods. The means by which a Lifeless could be created from a single breath.

 “This, perhaps, seems a small thing to you. I mean no insult, your majesty, but you must look at the past of this kingdom and its founding. It came from the servants of a Returned, and was developed by an aggressive, expansive mercantile effort. It controlled a very lucrative section of land which, through the discovery and maintenance of the northern passes--mixed with increasingly good navigation techniques--was becoming more and more prized a jewel to the outside world.”

 He paused, and his second hand came up, dropping little bits of metal which fell to the stonework with a sound not unlike falling rain. “And so, the war came,” he said. “The Five Scholars split, and some kingdoms gained the power of Lifeless, when others did not. Some kingdoms had weapons others could only envy. On this, history and stories agree. Military advantage means war.

 “And so, to answer the God’s question, my story claims one reason for the Manywar. The ability to create Lifeless so cheaply. Before the discovery of the single breath command, Lifeless had cost dozens, even hundreds, of Breaths to make. What good is a extra soldier--even a Lifeless one--if you can only gain one for every five hundred people you already have? However, being able to create a Lifeless with a single breath. . .one for one. . .that can double an army’s size. Twice as many soldiers. And half of them don’t need to eat.”

 The metal stopped falling.

 “Lifeless are not stronger than regular men,” Dust said. “They are the same. They are not more skilled than regular men. They are the same. However, not having to eat like regular men? That makes a difference to armies. And that advantage was enormous.”

 “And the royal family,” Siri said. “They split away because they didn’t agree with what Klad was doing. They saw moral problems with using Lifeless in such a way?”

 The storyteller paused. “Why, yes,” he finally said, smiling through his beard. “Yes, they did, your majesty.”

 She raised an eyebrow.

 “Psst,” Lightsong said, leaning in. “He’s lying to you.”

 The storyteller flushed. “Your grace,” he said, bowing deeply. “There are diverging explanations for the event! Why, I am a teller of stories--all stories.”

 “And what do other stories say?” Siri asked.

 “None of them agree, your majesty,” Dust said. “Your people speak of religious indignation and treachery from Klad the Usurper. The Pahn Kahl people tell of the Royal family working too hard to gain powerful Lifeless and Awakeners, then being surprised when their tools were turned against them. In Hallandren, they tell of the Royal family aligning themselves with Strifelover, making him their general and ignoring the will of the people by seeking war with a bloodlust.”

 He looked up, and then began to trail two handfuls of black, burned charcoal. “But, time burns away behind us, leaving only ash and memory. Memory which passes from mind to mind, then finally to my lips. When all is truth, and all are lies, which will you believe? Does it matter if some say the Royal family sought to create Lifeless? Your belief is your own.”

 “Either way, the Returned took control of Hallandren,” she said.

 “Yes,” Dust said. “And they gave it a new name, transformed from the old one. And yet, some speak still of the Royals who left, bearing the blood of the First Returned to their highlands.”

 Siri paused. “Blood of the First Returned?”

 “Yes, of course,” Dust said. “Your majesty, the First Returned--it was his wife, pregnant with his child, who became the first queen of this land. You are his descendant.”

 She sat back.

 Lightsong turned, curious. “You didn’t know this?” he asked, voice lacking most of its normal flippancy.

 She shook her head. “If this thing is known to my people, we do not speak of it.”

 Lightsong seemed to find that interesting. Down below, the priests were moving on to a different topic--something about security in the city and increasing patrols in the slums.

 She smiled, looking back at Dust and sensing a covert method of getting to the questions she really wanted to ask. “That means that the God Kings of Hallandren continued on without the blood of the First Returned.”

 “Yes, your majesty,” Dust said, crumbling clay out into the air before him.

 “And how many God Kings have there been?”

 “Five, your majesty,” the man said. “Including his grace, Lord Susebron, but not including Peacegiver.”

 “Five kings,” she said. “In three hundred years?”

 “Yes, your majesty,” Dust said, bringing out a handful of golden dust, letting it fall before him. “The kings of Hallandren were founded at the conclusion of the Manywar, the first one gaining his Breath and life from Peacegiver himself. Since that day, each God King has given birth to a stillborn son, who then Returned and took his place.”

 Siri frowned, leaning forward. “Wait. How did Peacegiver create a new God King?”

 “Ah,” Dust said, switching back to sand with his left hand. “Now there is a story lost in time. How indeed? Breath can be passed from one man to another, but gaining a lot of Breath--no matter how much--does not make one a god. Legends say that Peacegiver died by granting his Breath to his successor, and there is some precedent for this. After all, can a God not give his life away to bless another?”

 “Not exactly a sign of mental stability, in my opinion,” Lightsong said, waving for some more grapes. “You don’t encourage me to have confidence in our predecessors, storyteller. Besides, if a God gives away his Breath, it doesn’t turn the recipient into a God, even if it does take away their infirmities.”

 “I speak only stories, your grace,” Dust said. “They may be truths, they may be falsehoods. All I know is that the stories themselves exist, and that I must tell them.”

 With as much flair as possible, Siri thought, watching him reach into yet another pocket and pull free a handful of small bits of grass and earth. He let bits fall slowly between his fingers.

 “I speak of foundations, your grace,” Dust said. “Of the things which began our kingdom. Peacegiver was no ordinary Returned, for he managed to stop the Lifeless from rampaging. Indeed, he stole away the armies of the Hallandren--leaving his own people powerless--in an effort to bring peace to the lands. By then, of course, it was too late for Kuth and Huth, yet the other kingdoms--Pahn Kahl, Tedradel, Gys, and Hallandren itself--were brought out of the conflict.

 “Why can we not assume more from this God of Gods, the one who was able to accomplish so much? Perhaps he did do something, as the priests claim. Leave some seed within the God Kings of Hallandren, allowing them to pass their power from father to son.”

 Which claim would give them a heritage of divinity, Siri thought idly slipping a sliced grape into her mouth. And that would give them a reason to rule even beyond their natures as Returned. With the God of Gods as their progenitor, they could become God Kings. And the only one who could threaten them would be. . . .

 The Royal family of Idris, who can apparently trace their line back to the First Returned. Another heritage of divinity, a challenger for right of rule in Hallandren.

 That didn’t tell her, however, how the God Kings had died.

 “They’re immortal, right?” Siri asked.

 Dust nodded, smoothly dropping the rest of his grass and dirt, moving into a different discussion by bringing forward a handful of white powder. “Indeed, your majesty. Like all Returned, the God Kings do not age.”

 “But, why have there been five of them, then?” she asked. “Why did the first one die?”

 “Why do any Returned pass on, your majesty?” Dust asked.

 “Because they are loony,” Lightsong said.

 The storyteller smiled. “Because they tire of life. Gods are not like regular men, your majesty. They Return to bring back knowledge and prophesy, but they eventually grow bored with life. They come back for us, not for themselves, and when they can no longer endure being stuck here in life, they pass on. With God Kings, they tend to endure only as long as it takes them to produce an heir.”

 Siri started. “That’s commonly known?” she asked, then cringed slightly, hoping the comment wouldn’t sound suspicious.

 “Of course it is, your majesty,” the storyteller said. “At least, to storytellers and scholars. Each God King has passed from this world shortly after his son and heir was born. It is natural, in a way. Once the heir has arrived, the God King no longer needs to be patient. He can release himself from the burdens of life. Each God King has grown restless at the birth of his son, and has sought out an opporunity to use up his Breath. They seek out suffering, heal the people, and then. . . .”

 He threw up a hand, snapping his fingers, throwing up a little spray of water which puffed to mist.

 “And then they pass on,” he said. “Leaving their people blessed and their heir to rule until he himself can produce a child.”

 The group fell silent, the mist evaporating in front of Dust.

 “Not exactly the most charming thing to inform a newlywed wife, storyteller,” Lightsong noted. “That her husband is going to grow bored with life as soon as she bears him a son?”

 “I seek not to be charming, your grace,” Dust said, bowing his head. At his feet, the various dusts, sands, and glitters mixed together in the faint breeze. “I only tell stories. This one is known to most. I should think that her majesty would like to be aware of it as well.”

 “Thank you,” Siri said quietly. “It was good of you to speak of it.”

 Dust continued to bow his head.

 So there is an official explanation, Siri thought, stomach twisting. And it’s actually a pretty good one. Theologically, it makes sense that the God Kings would leave once they had someone else to take over for them.

 But, that doesn’t explain how Peacegiver’s Treasure--that wealth of Breath--passes grom God King to God King. And, it doesn’t explain why a man like Susebron would get tired of life when he seems so excited by it.

 The official story would work fine for those who didn’t know the God King. However, it fell flat for Siri. Susebron didn’t want to pass from this life. He barely understood it--he was like a child, discovering things for the first time.

 It was a convenient explanation, but not one she accepted. At least, not yet. As she sat, however, she did begin to worry.

 Would things change if a child were born? Would he grow tired of her that easily?

 “I suppose it doesn’t really matter to you if he dies,” Lightsong said idly, picking at the grapes. “I mean, you might even be able to go home. No harm done, people healed, new heir on the throne. Everyone is either happy or dead.”

 The priests continued to argue below. Dust continued to bow, waiting for dismissal.

 Happy. . .or dead. Her stomach twisted. “Excuse me,” she said, rising. “I would like to walk about a bit. Thank you for your storytelling, Dust.”

 With that--entourage in tow--she quickly left the pavilion, worried that Lightsong might see her tears.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-four

 Lightsong watched the young queen dart away from his pavilion, feeling an odd sense of. . .guilt.

 How very odd for me, he thought, taking a sip of wine. After the sweet grapes, however, it tasted a little bitter and he waved it away.

 Or, maybe the bitterness was from something else. He eyed the young queen, frowning to himself. He’d made the comment about her husband’s death in his usual flippant way. In his opinion, it was usually best for people to hear the truth bluntly--and amusingly.

 Still, he hadn’t expected such a reaction. What was the God King to her? Nothing, likely. She’d been sent to be his bride, probably against her will. His comment should have been one of the more bland ones he’d made. Yet, she’d taken it with apparent grief.

 It almost seemed like she was worried about the God King. As if she cared for him.

 Impossible, he thought, idly watching Siri walk along the stone pathway around the arena. Such a small, young thing she was, all dressed up in gold and blue.

 Young? he thought. She’s been alive longer than I have, at least in my Returned state. And yet, he retained some things--such as his perception of his age. He didn’t feel like he was five. He felt far older.

 That age should have taught him to hold his tongue when speaking of making widows out of young girls. He sat thoughtfully. Could the girl actually have an affection for the God King?

 It still seemed unlikely. She’d only been in the city for a couple of months, and he knew--through rumors--what her life must be like. Forced to perform her duty as a wife for a man to whom she could not speak, could not know. A man who represented all the things that her culture taught were profane.

 The only thing he could determine, then, was that she was worried about what might happen to her if her husband killed himself. A legitimate worry. The queen would lose most of her notoriety if she lost her husband.

 Lightsong nodded to himself, turning to look back out at the arguing priests. They were done with sewage and guard patrols, and had moved on to other topics.

 “We must prepare ourselves for the inevitable war,” one of them was saying. “Recent events make it clear that we cannot live with the Idrians with any assurance of peace or security. This conflict will come, whether we wish it or not.”

 Lightsong sat idly, tapping one finger against the arm rest of his chair.

 For five years, I’ve been irrelevant, he thought. I didn’t have a vote on any of the important court councils, I simply held the codes to a segment of Lifeless. I’ve crafted a divine reputation out of being the useless one.

 He watched for a time. The tone was far more antagonistic than it had been during previous meetings. However, that wasn’t what worried him. The problem was the one spearheading the movement for war.

 Fafad, high priest of Stillmark the Kind. Normally, Lightsong wouldn’t have bothered paying attention to which priests said what. Yet, this day’s arguments were disturbing, for Fafad had always been the most outspoken against the war.

 What had made him change his mind?

 It wasn’t long before Blushweaver made her way to his pavilion. By the time she arrived, his taste for wine had returned, and he was sipping thoughtfully as he watched the proceedings. The voices against war were soft and infrequent.

 Blushweaver sat beside him, a rustle of cloth and a waft of perfume. Lightsong didn’t look toward her.

 “How did you get to Fafad?” he finally asked.

 “I didn’t,” Blushweaver said. “I don’t know why he changed his mind. I wish he hadn’t done it so quickly--it makes the transformation seem suspicious, and makes people think I manipulated him. But, I’ll take the support.”

 “You wish for war so badly?”

 “I wish for our people to be aware of the threat,” Blushweaver said. “You think I want this to happen? You think I want to send our people to die and kill?”

 Lightsong looked at her, judging her sincerity. She had such beautiful eyes. One rarely noticed that, considering the way that she proffered the rest of her assets with such over-intoxicating sensuality.

 “No,” he said. “I don’t think you want a war.”

 She nodded sharply. Her dress was sleek and trim this day, as always, but it was particularly revealing up top, where her breasts were pressed up and forward, like flowers demanding attention. Lightsong looked away.

 “You’re boring today,” Blushweaver said.

 “I’m distracted.”

 “We should be happy,” Blushweaver said. “The priests have almost all come around to the inevitability of this conflict. Soon, there will be a call for attack made to the main assembly of Gods.”

 Lightsong nodded quietly. The main assembly of Gods was only called to judge in the most important of situations. In that case, they all had a vote. And, if the vote was for war, the Gods with Lifeless Commands--Gods like Lightsong--would be called upon to lead and administrate the battle.

 “You’ve changed the Commands on Hopefinder’s ten thousand?” Lightsong asked.

 She nodded. “They’re mine now, as are Mercystar’s.”

 Colors, he thought. Between the two of us, we now control three fourths of the kingdom’s armies.

 What in the name of the Iridescent Tones am I getting myself into?

 Blushweaver settled back in her chair, eying the smaller one that Siri had vacated. Then, she turned to Lightsong. “I am annoyed, however, at Allmother.”

 “Because she’s prettier than you, or because she’s smarter?”
 Blushweaver regarded him with a flat stare.

 “Just trying to act less boring, my dear,” he said, sighing.

 “Allmother holds the last group of Lifeless,” Blushweaver said.

 “An odd choice, wouldn’t you think?” Lightsong said. “I mean, I make sense--assuming you don’t know me, of course--since I’m supposedly Bold. Hopefinder represents Justice, a nice mix with soldiers. Even Mercystar, who represents benevolence, makes sense for one who bears soldiers. But Allmother? Goddess of matrons and families? Giving her ten thousand Lifeless is enough to make even me consider my drunk monkey theory.”

 “The one who chooses Returned names and titles?”

 “Exactly,” Lightsong said. “Only, I’m expanding the theory. I am now tempted to believe that God--or the universe, or time, or whatever you think controls all of this--really is just a drunk monkey.”

 She leaned over, squeezing her arms together, seriously threatening to burst her chest out the front of her dress. “And, you think my title was chosen by happenstance?”

 He paused. Then, he smiled. “My dear, did you just try to prove the existence of God through the use of your cleavage?”

 She smiled. “You’d be surprised what a good wiggle of the chest can accomplish.”

 “Hum. I’d never considered the theological power of your breasts, my dear. If there were a church dedicated to them, perhaps you’d make a theist out of me. Regardless, are you going to tell me what specifically Allmother did to annoy you?”

 “She won’t give me her Lifeless commands,” Blushweaver said.

 “Not surprising,” Lightsong said. “I hardly trust you, and I’m your friend.”

 “We need those Commands, Lightsong.”

 “Why?” he asked. “We’ve got three of the four--we dominate the armies already.”

 “We can’t afford inbiting or divisiveness,” Blushweaver said. “If her ten were to turn against our thirty, we’d win, but we’d be left very weak.”

 He frowned. “Surely she wouldn’t do that.”

 “Surely we’d rather be certain.”

 Lightsong sighed. “Very well, then. I’ll talk to her.”

 “That. . .might not be a good idea.”

 He raised an eyebrow.

 “She doesn’t like you very much.”

 “Ah,” he said. “Finally a Goddess with good taste.”

 She glanced at him. “Do I need to wiggle my breasts at you again?”

 “No, please. I don’t know if I’d be able to stand the theological debate that would follow. I’ll be good.”

 “All right, then,” she said, sitting back, looking down at the priests who were still arguing.

 They sure are taking a long time on this one, he thought. He glanced over toward the other side of the court arena, where Siri had paused, arms resting on the stonework--which was too tall for her to do comfortably, because of her regular human height.

 Perhaps it wasn’t thinking of her husband’s death that bothered her, he thought. Maybe it was because the discussion turned to war.

 A war her people couldn’t win. That was another good reason why the conflict was becoming inevitable. The storyteller had said it well--when one side had a distinct advantage, war seemed to become inevitable. Hallandren had been building its Lifeless armies for centuries, slowly growing their numbers to the point that they were finally as big as the force Peacegiver had destroyed.

 Idris held the passes to the northern kingdoms, through which Hallandren merchants were forced to pay enormous tariffs in order to sell their dyes and fruits. Now that the Hallandren crown again had royal blood to infuse into the line, war seemed even more likely.

 Blushweaver huffed beside him, and he noticed that she had noticed his study of Siri. She was watching the queen with undisguised dislike.

 Lightsong immediately changed the topic. “Do you know anything about a tunnel complex beneath the Court of Gods?”

 Blushweaver turned back toward him, shrugging. “Sure. Some of the palaces have tunnels beneath them, places for storage and the like.”

 “Have you ever been down in any of them?”

 She shook her head. “The ones beneath my palace are rather small. I only know about them because of my high priestess. When she joined my service, asked me if I wanted mine connected to the main complex of tunnels. I said I didn’t.”

 “Because you didn’t want others to have access to your palace through the network?”

 “No,” she said, turning back to watching the priests below. “Because I didn’t want to deal with the racket of all that digging. Can I have some more wine, please?”

 #

 Siri watched the proceedings for quite a long time. Watching the arguments, she felt a little like Lightsong said he did. Because she really didn’t have a say about what the court did, it was almost more frustrating than it was useful to pay attention. Yet, she wanted to know. The arguments of the priests were, in a way, her only connection to the outside world.

 She was not encouraged by what she heard. As the time passed, the sun growing close to the horizon and servants lighting massive torches along the walkway, Siri found herself feeling more and more daunted by the workings of the city around her.

 Her husband was probably either going to be killed or persuaded to kill himself in the upcoming year. Her homeland, in turn, was about to be invaded by the very kingdom her husband ruled--and yet, he could do nothing to stop it because he had no way to communicate with the rest of the people.

 And then, there was the guilt that came from actually enjoying all of the chaos and problems, if only a little bit. At least she wasn’t sitting bored, alone in the palace.

 Back home, she’d had to be contrary and disobedient to find any kind of excitement. Here, she only had to stand and watch, and things would begin to topple against each other and cause a clatter. Of course, there was far too much clatter at present, but that didn’t stop her from thrilling a little bit at her part in it.

 Silly fool, she told herself. Everything you love is in danger, and you’re thinking about how exiting it is?

 She needed to find a way to help Susebron. In doing so, perhaps she could bring him out from beneath the oppressive control of the priests. Then he might be able to do something to help her homeland. He was, after all, the God King. They’d listen to his orders.

 Assuming he could make those orders without getting himself killed by his own priesthood.

 She’d let herself grow distracted enough that she almost missed the comment from below. It was spoken by one of the priests most strongly in favor of attacking.

 “Have you not heard of the Idrian agent who has been causing so much havoc in the city?” the priest asked. “The Idrians are preparing for the war! They know that a conflict is inevitable, and so they’ve begun to work against us!”

 Siri perked up. Idrian agents in the city?

 “Bah,” said another of the priests. “The ‘infiltrator’ you speak of is said to be a princess of the royal family. That’s obviously a story for the common people. Why would a princess come in secret to T’Telir? Theses stories are ridiculous and unfounded.”

 Siri grimaced. That, at least, was obviously true. Her sisters were not the types to come and work as ‘Idrian agents.’ She smiled, imagining her soft-spoken monk of a sister--or even Vivenna in her prim outfits and stoic attitude--coming to T’Telir in secret. Part of her was beginning to have a little trouble remembering that Vivenna had been the one preparing to come to the city in the first place. Vivenna? In the palace, having to deal with Susebron and the wild costumes?

 Vivenna would have done it, of course. She’d trained all of her life to become queen of Hallandren. And yet, Vivenna’s stoic coldness would never have coaxed Susebron out of his imperial mask. Vivenna’s quiet disapproval would have alienated her from Gods like Lightsong. Vivenna would have hated wearing the beautiful dresses, and would never have appreciated the colors and variety in the city.

 Siri might not have been the best one for the position. But, she was slowly coming to realize that Vivenna hadn’t been a good choice either.

 A group of people was approaching along the walkway. Siri remained where she was, though her servants backed up against the other wall, making room for the people to pass. The newcomers moved behind Siri, but she was too distracted by her thoughts to pay much attention.

 “Talking about a relative of yours?” a voice asked.

 Siri started, spinning to find a dark-haired goddess wearing a lavish--and revealing--gown of green and silver. Like most of the Gods, this one stood a good head taller than a normal person, and she looked down a Siri with a raised eyebrow.

 “Your. . .grace?” Siri asked.

 “They’re discussing the famous hidden princess,” the Goddess said with a wave of her hand. “She’d have to be a relative of yours, if she really does have the royal locks.”

 Siri shuffled a bit, glancing back at the priests. “They must be mistaken. I’m the only princess in Hallandren.”

 “The stories of her are quite prevalent.”

 Siri fell silent.

 “My Lightsong has taken a liking to you, princess,” the Goddess said, folding her arms.

 “He has been very kind to me,” Siri said carefully, trying to give the right image--that of the person she was, only less threatening. A little more confused. “Might I ask which one you are, your grace?”

 “I am called Blushweaver,” the Goddess said.

 “I am pleased to meet you.”

 “No, you aren’t,” Blushweaver said. She leaned in, eyes narrowing. “I don’t like what you’re doing here.”

 “Excuse me?”

 Blushweaver raised a finger. “He’s a better man than any of us, princess. Don’t you go corrupting him and pulling him into your schemes.”

 “I don’t know what you mean,” Siri said, frowning with real confusion.

 “Don’t give me your false naiveté,” Blushweaver said. “Lightsong is a good man--one of the last ones we have left in this court. If you taint him, I will destroy you. Do you understand?”

 Siri nodded dumbly, then Blushweaver spun and moved away, mumbling, “Find someone else’s bed to climb into, you little slut.”

 Siri watched her go, dumbfounded. When she finally shook herself out of the stupor, she flushed, then fled the court.

#

 By the time she got back to the palace, Siri was quite ready for her nightly bath. She entered the bathing chamber, letting her serving women undress her. Then, they retreated with the clothing, leaving the room to prepare her evening’s gown, as well as get ready to apply makup and the like in the next room. They left Siri in the hands of a group of lessser attendants, the ones who’s job it was to follow her into the massive tub and scrub her clean.

 Siri relaxed back, sighing as the women began to work. Another group--also standing fully-clothed in the deep water--pulled her hair straight, then cut most of it free, something she’d ordered them to do every night.

 The women began to scrub what was left of her hair, others working with soaps to clean the sweat and dirt from her body. For a few moments, at least, she let herself forget the threats to her people and her husband. She even let herself forget Blushweaver and her snappish misunderstanding. She just enjoyed the heat and the scents of the perfumed water.

 “You wanted to speak with me, princess?” a voice asked.

 Siri started, splashing slightly as she dunked her body beneath the water. She spun, angrily.

 “Bluefingers,” she snapped. “I thought we’d cleared this up on the first day!”

 He stood at he rim of the tub, fingers blue, typically anxious as he began to pace. “Oh, please,” he said. “I have daughters twice your age, princess. You wanted to talk to me. Well, this is where I will talk. Away from ears.”

 He nodded to several of the serving girls, and they began to splash just a bit more, speaking quietly as well, generally creating a low noise.

 Siri flushed, her hair a deep red--though a few cut-off strands that hadn’t been scooped up remained a deep yellow from before.

 “Haven’t you gotten over your shyness yet?” Bluefingers asked. “You’ve been in Hallandren for months.”

 Siri eyed him, but did not go back to relaxing, even if she did let the serving women continue to work on her hair and scrub her back. She was careful to keep certain parts of her body beneath the water.

 “Won’t it seem suspicious to have the serving women making so much noise?” she asked.

 Bluefingers waved a hand. “They’re already considered second class servants by most in the palace.”

 Siri paused. These weren’t her usual day servants, but the lesser servants--the ones who usually bathed her, or cleaned up rooms after she left. They wore brown.

 “Pahn Kahl?” she asked.

 “Of course. You sent me a message earlier. What did you mean by my plans?”

 Siri bit her lip, sorting through the dozens of ideas she had considered, discarding them all. What did she know? What could she build upon? How could she make Bluefingers willing to trade?
 He gave me clues, she thought. He tried to scare me into not sleeping with the king. But, he had no reason to help me. He barely knew me.

 He has other motives for not wanting an heir to be born.

 “What happens when a new God King takes the throne?” she asked carefully.

 He eyed her. “So, you’ve figured that out, then?”

 Figured out what? She thought. “Of course I have,” she said out loud.

 He nodded, wringing his hands nervously. “Of course, of course. Then you can see why I’m so nervous? We worked hard to get me where I am. It isn’t easy for a Pahn Kahl man to rise high in the theocracy of Hallandren. Once we got me into place, I worked so hard to provide work for my people. Good work, in the palace itself. The serving girls who wash you, they have far better lives than the Pahn Kahl who work the dye fields. But, that will all be lost. We don’t believe in their Gods. Why should we be treated as well as people of their own faith?”

 “I still don’t see why it has to happen,” Siri said carefully. “You could keep your places.”

 He waved a nervous hand. “Of course it doesn’t have to, but tradition is tradition. The Hallandren people are very lax in every area but religion. When a new God King is chosen, his servants are replaced. They won’t kill us to send us into the afterlife with our lord--that horrid practice hasn’t been used since the days before the Manywar--but we will be dismissed. A new God King represents a fresh start.”

 He stopped pacing, looking at her, still naked in the water. “But,” he said, “I guess my job security is the lesser of our problems.”

 Siri snorted. “You mean to tell me that you’re worried about my safety over your own place in the palace?”

 “Of course not,” he said, kneeling down beside the tub, speaking quietly. “But the God King’s life. . .well, that worries me.”

 “So,” Siri said, “I haven’t been able to decide yet. Do the God Kings actually give up their lives willingly once they have an heir, or are they coerced into it?”

 “I’m not sure,” Bluefingers admitted. “But, there are stories. Not official ones, of course. Ones spoken of by my people regarding the last God King’s death. They say that the plague he cured. . .well, he wasn’t even in the city when the ‘curing’ happened. My suspicion is that they forced him to give up his Breath to his son, and that killed him.”

 He doesn’t know, Siri thought. He doesn’t realize that Susebron is a mute.

 “How closely have you served with the God King?” she asked.

 He shrugged. “As close as any servant considered unholy. I’m not allowed to touch him or speak to him. But, princess, I’ve served him all my life. He’s not my God, but he’s something better.

 “I think these priests. . .they look upon their Gods as placeholders. It doesn’t really matter to them if one person is holding the station or another. Me, I’ve served his majesty for my entire life. I was hired into the palace as a lad, and I remember Susebron’s childhood. I cleaned his quarters. He’s not my God, but he is my liege. And now these priests are planning to kill him.”

 He turned back to his pacing, wringing his hands a bit. “But, there’s nothing to be done.”

 “Yes, there is,” she said.

 He waved a hand. “I gave you a warning, and you ignored it. I know that you’ve been performing your duties as a wife. Though, perhaps we could find some way of making certain that no pregnancy of yours comes to term.”

 Siri flushed. “I would never do such a thing! Austre forbids it.”

 “You wouldn’t?” Bluefingers asked. “Even to save the life of the God King? But. . .of course. What is he to you? Your captor and imprisoner, I should think. Yes. Perhaps my warnings were useless.”

 “I do care, Bluefingers,” she said. “And I think we can stop things before they get to the point of worrying about an heir. I’ve been talking to the God King.”

 Bluefingers paused, looking directly at her. “What?”

 “I’ve been talking to him,” Siri admitted, glancing down. “He’s not as harsh as you might think. I don’t think this has to end with him dying or your people losing their places in the palace.”

 Bluefingers studied her, watching her to the point that she flushed again, ducking a little more down into the water.

 “I see that you’ve found yourself a position of power,” he noted.

 Or, at least, one that looks powerful, she thought ruefully. “If things turn out as I want them to, I’ll make certain your people are cared for.”

 “And my side of the bargain?” he asked.

 “If things don’t turn out as I want them to,” she said, taking a deep breath, heart fluttering. “I want you to get Susebron and I out of the palace.”

 Silence.

 “Deal,” he finally said, wringing his hands nervously. “But let us make certain it does not come to that. Is the God King aware of the danger from his own priests?”

 “He is,” Siri lied. “In fact, he knew about it before I did. He’s the one who told me I needed to contact you.”

 “He did?” Bluefingers asked, frowning slightly.

 “Yes,” Siri said. “I will be in touch on how to make this turn out well for all of us. And, until then, I would appreciate it if you’d let me get back to my bath.”

 Bluefingers nodded slowly, then retreated from the bathing chamber. Siri, however, found it hard to still her nerves, even as she lay back in the water. She wasn’t certain if she’d handled the exchange well or not. But, she seemed to have gained something. Now she just had to figure out how to use it.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-five

 Jewels worked quietly, ignoring Vivenna and pulling another stitch tight. Clod’s guts--intestines, stomach, and the rest--lay on the floor beside him, carefully pulled out and arranged so that they could be stitched together. Jewels was working on the intestines at the moment, sewing with a thread and needle.

 It was gruesome. A piece of Vivenna knew that. And yet, it didn’t really affect her. Not after the shock she’d had earlier. They were in the safe house. Tonk Fah had gone to scout the regular house to see if Peprin was all right. Denth was downstairs. She could hear him thumping back up on the rickety, uncertain steps.

 Vivenna sat on the floor. She’d put her skirt back on, and sat with legs pulled up against her chest. Jewels worked on the floor as well, though she’d spread out a sheet beneath her. The woman continued to ignore Vivenna. That was better than the angry shouts she’d given when she’d found that Clod had been injured.

 Injured. Did that even mean anything to a creature like Clod? He was awake; she could see that his eyes were open. Yet, he obviously had trouble moving. What was the point of sewing up his insides? Would they heal? He didn’t need to eat. Why bother with intestines?

 Vivenna shivered, looking away, but not because of the disturbing image. She felt, in a way, as if her own insides had been ripped out. Exposed. Shown for the world to see.

 She closed her eyes. Hours later, and she was still shaking from the terror of huddling in that alleyway, thinking that she’d soon be killed. What had she proven to be, when finally threatened? Modesty had meant nothing when she was being threatened--she’d pulled of her skirt rather than let it trip her again. Her hair had meant nothing--she’d ignored it as soon as the danger arrived.

 Her religion, apparently, meant nothing when a chance to save herself was provided. Not that she’d been able to use her Breath--she hadn’t even managed to commit blasphemy correctly.

 She heard the door click as he Denth left the basement, then closed the door behind him. He approached, handing Jewels something that looked like a large wineskin. The woman took it, then immediately turned back to her work.

 Denth sat down beside Vivenna.

 “They say a man doesn’t know himself until he faces death for the first time,” he said in a conversational tone. “I don’t know about that, personally. It not only sounds a little dramatic, it seems to me that the person you are when you’re about to die isn’t as important as the person you are during the rest of your life. Why should a few moments matter more than an entire lifetime?”

 Vivenna didn’t respond.

 “Everyone gets scared, princess,” he said. “Brave men will run the first time they see battle, no matter how courageous they are. In armies, that’s why there’s so much training and practice. The ones who hold their line aren’t the brave ones, they’re the well-trained ones. We have instincts, like any other animal. They take over sometimes. That’s all right.”

 She continued to watch as Jewels carefully placed the intestines back into Clod’s chest. Then, she took out a small package and removed something that looked like a strip of meat.

 “You did well, actually,” Denth said. “Kept your wits about you. Didn’t freeze. Found the quickest way out. I’ve protected some people who will just stand there and die unless you shake them and force them to run.”

 “I want you to teach me Awakening,” Vivenna whispered.

 He paused, glancing at her. “Do you. . .want to think about that a bit first?”

 “I have,” she whispered, arms around knees, head resting against them. “I thought I was stronger than I am. I thought I wouldn’t need it. I thought I’d rather die than use it. But that’s a lie. In that moment, I would have done anything to survive.”

 Denth smiled. “You’d make a good mercenary,” he noted.

 “It’s wrong,” she said, still staring forward. “But, I can’t claim to be pure any more. I might as well understand what I have. Use it. If that damns me, then so be it. At least it will have helped me survive long enough to destroy the Hallandren.”

 Denth raised an eyebrow. “You want to destroy them now, eh? No more simple sabotage and undermining?”

 She shook her head. “I want this kingdom overthrown,” she whispered. “Just like the slum lords said. It can corrupt those poor people. It can corrupt even me. I hate it.”

 “I--”

 “No, Denth,” Vivenna said. Her hair bled a deep red, and for once she didn’t care. “I really hate it. I’ve always hated this people. They took my childhood. I had to prepare. Become their queen. Get ready to marry the God King. Everyone said he was unholy and a heretic. Yet I was supposed to marry him and have sex with him!

 “I hate this entire city, with its colors and its Gods! I hate the fact that it has taken my life, ripped it away from me, and demanded that I leave behind all that I love! I hate the busy streets, the placating gardens, the commerce, and the suffocating weather.

 “I hate their arrogance most of all. Thinking they could push my father around, force him into that treaty twenty years ago. They’ve controlled my life. Dominated it. Ruined it. And now they have my sister.”

 She sat, puffing, feeling frustrated.

 “You’ll have your vengeance,” Denth whispered.

 She looked at him. “I want them to hurt, Denth. The attack today, it wasn’t about subduing a rebellious element. The Hallandrens sent those soldiers in to kill, not subdue. Kill the poor that they created. We’re going to stop them from doing things like that. I don’t care what it takes. I’m tired of being pretty and nice and ignoring ostentation. I want to do something.”

 Denth nodded slowly. “All right. I’ll get the others together, and we'll talk about our options. We’ll change courses, start making our attacks a little more painful.”

 “Good,” she said. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling frustrated, wishing that she was strong enough to keep all of these emotions away. But, she wasn’t.

 She’d kept them in too long. That was the problem.

 “This was never about your sister, was it?” Denth asked. “Coming here?”

 She shook her head, eyes still shut.

 “Why, then?”

 “I had trained all of my life,” she whispered. “I was the one who would sacrifice herself. When Siri left, I became nothing. I had to come and get it back.”

 “But, you just said that you’ve always hated Hallandren,” he said, sounding confused.

 “I have. And I do. That’s why I had to come.”

 He was silent for a few moments. “Too complicated for a mercenary, I guess,” he finally said.

 She opened her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she understood, either. She’d always kept a tight grip on her hatred, only letting it manifest in distain for Hallandren ways. But, she confronted it now. Acknowledged it.

 Somehow, Hallandren could be loathesome, yet transfixing at the same time. As if. . .until she came and saw the place for herself, she wouldn’t have a real focus--a real understanding, a real image--of what it was that had destroyed her life.

 Regardless, she now understood her purpose. If her Breaths would help, then she would use them. Just like Lemks. Just like those slum lords. She wasn’t so high. She never had been.

 But, she doubted Denth would understand all of that. Instead, Vivenna nodded toward Jewels. The woman had picked up what appeared to be several screws. “What is she doing?”

 Denth turned. “Screwing on a new muscle,” she said. “One of the ones in his side got cut, sheered right through. Muscles won’t work right if you just sew them together. So, she has to replace the whole thing.”

 “With screws?”

 Denth nodded. “Right into the bone. It works all right. Not perfectly, but all right. Of course, no wound can ever be perfectly fixed on a Lifeless, though he will heal some. You just sew them up, pump them full of ichor-alcohol, and try not to let them take too much more damage. If you fix them enough times, the body will stop working right, and you’ll have to spend another Breath to keep them going. By then, it’s usually best to just buy another body.”

 Vivenna sat quietly. Saved by a monster. Perhaps that was what made her so determined to use her Breath. She should be dead, but Clod had saved her. A Lifeless.

 She didn’t accept him theologically. Nor did she accept her Breaths. But, it seemed to her that she already owed her life to something that should not exist. She should be dead. More than that, she felt pity for the thing. Even affection.

 Considering that, she figured that she was already damned to the point that using her Breaths wouldn’t matter.

 “He fought well,” she whispered. “Better than the ones the guards were using.”

 Denth glanced at the Lifeless. “They’re not all equal. Most Lifeless, they’re just made out of whatever body happens to be around. But, if you pay good money, you can get one who’s skills in life matched what you want him to do in death.”

 She felt a chill, remembering just that moment of humanity she’d seen in Clod’s life as he defended her. If an undead monstrosity could be a hero, then a pious princess could certainly blaspheme.

 Or, was she still just trying to justify the things that she knew she would soon do?

 “Skill,” she whispered. “They keep it?”

 Denth nodded. “Some semblance of it, at least. Considering what we paid for this guy, he’d better have been quite the soldier in life. And that’s why it’s worth the money for us to take the time to learn how to repair him and keep him going, rather than buy a new one.”

 They treat him just like a thing, Vivenna thought. Just like she should. And yet, more and more, she thought of Clod as a ‘he.’ He had saved her life. Not Denth, not Tonk Fah. Clod. It seemed to her that they should show more respect for him, all things considered.

 Eventually, Jewels finished applying muscles, then sewed the skin closed with a thick string that was almost wire.

 “Though he’ll kind of heal,” Denth said, “it’s best to use something strong in the sewing, so the wound doesn’t rip apart again.”

 Vivenna nodded. “The. . .juice.”

 “Ichor-alcohol,” Denth said. “Discovered by the Five Scholars, apparently. Wonderful stuff. Keeps a Lifeless going far longer than they once did.”

 “That’s what let the Manywar occur?” she whispered. “Getting the mixture right?”

 “That’s part of it. That, and the discovery--again by one of the Five Scholars, I forget which one--of some new Commands. If you really want to be an Awakener, princess, that’s what you have to learn. The Commands. Not everything you say will work to Awaken.”

 She nodded. “Teach me.”

 To the side Jewels got out a small pump and stuck a small hose into Clod’s shoulder, into a little clasp that had apparently been designed for the purpose. She began to pump the Ichor-alcohol into the veins, moving the pump very slowly, probably in order to keep from bursting the veins.

 “Well,” Denth said, “there are a lot of commands. However, if you want to bring a rope to life--like that one you tried to use back in the alleyway--a good Commmnad is ‘hold things.’ Speak it with a clear voice, willing your Breath to act.

 “If you do it right, the rope will grab whatever it’s closest to. ‘Protect me’ is another good one, though it can be interpreted in fairly strange ways if you don’t imagine exactly what you want when you say the words.”

 “Imagine?” Vivenna asked.

 He nodded. “You have to form the Command in your head, not just speak it. The Breath you give up, it’s part of your life. Your soul, you Idrians might say. When you Awaken something, it becomes part of you. If you’re good--and practiced--the things you Awaken will do what you want them to. Just like your hands will grab the things you want them to. They’re part of you. They understand.”

 She nodded slowly. Outside, a shadow passed the window, and Tonk Fah entered, closing the door behind him.

 “Well?” Denth asked.

 “Looks safe,” he said, eyeing Clod. “How’s the stiff?”

 “Just finished,” Jewels said. “Clod, howl of the sun. Resume according to prior instructions. Howl of the sun.”

 Clod sat up, looking about. Vivenna waited as his eyes passed over her, but there didn’t seem to be recognition or gladness in them. He wore the same dull, unemotional expression as always.

 Of course he does, Vivenna thought, standing. He’s Lifeless, after all. And, what was that Jewels said to him?

 Howl of the Sun. Vivenna filed it away, then followed as they left the building.

#

 A short time later, the group finally reached their home. Peprin ran out excitedly, jabbering questions about the attack. He went to Jewels first, though she brushed him off. As Vivenna entered the building, he moved up to her. “Vivenna? What happened?”

 She just shook her head.

 “There was fighting,” he said, following her up the stairs. “I heard about it.”

 “There was an attack on the camp we visited,” Vivenna said tiredly, reaching the top of the stairs beside her room. “A squad of Lifeless under governmental control. They started killing people.”

 “Lord of Colors!” Peprin said. “Is Jewels all right?”

 Vivenna flushed, turning on the landing, looking down the stairs toward him. “Why do you ask about her?”

 Peprin shrugged. “She’s kind of pretty, and I think she’s nice.”

 “Should you be saying things like that?” Vivenna asked, noticing half-heartedly that her hair was turning red again. “Aren’t you engaged to me?”

 He frowned. “Well, I mean, not technically. You were engaged to the God King.”

 “But, you know what our fathers wanted,” she said, hands on hips.

 “I did,” Peprin said. “But, well, when we left Idris, I figured we were both going to get disinherited. I figured there was no reason to keep up the charade.”

 Charade?

 “I mean, let’s be honest, Vivenna,” he said, smiling a bit. “You really haven’t ever been that nice to me. I know you think I’m stupid, and most of the time, I guess you’re probably right. But, if you really cared about me, I figured that you wouldn’t make me feel stupid too. Jewels grumbles at me, but she doesn’t make me feel like an idiot. And, she laughs at my jokes some times. You’ve never done that.”

 “But. . . .” Vivenna said, finding herself at a slight loss for words. “But, why did you follow me down to Hallandren, then?”

 He blinked. “Well, for Siri, of course. Isn’t that why we came? To rescue her? She’s like a little sister to me.” He smiled fondly, then shrugged. “Good night, Vivenna. Then, he trailed down the steps, calling to Jewels to see if she was hurt or not.

 Vivenna watched him go.

 He’s twice the person I am, she thought with shame, turning toward her room. But I’m just finding it hard to care any more.

 Everything had been taken from her. Why not Peprin, too? It made sense. Her hatred for Hallandren grew a little more firm as she stepped into her room.

 I need to sleep, she thought. Maybe after that, I can figure out just what in the name of the Colors I’m doing in this kingdom.

 On one thing she remained firm. She was going to learn how to Awaken. The Vivenna from before--the one who had a right to stand up tall and pronounce Breath to be unholy--no longer had a place in her. That woman could have avoided learning to Awaken. The real Vivenna, however, hadn’t come to Hallandren to save her sister. She’d come because she couldn’t stand having her importance taken from her.

 She’d learn. That was her punishment.

 Inside her room, she tiredly pushed the door closed, locking the bolt. Then, she walked over to pull the drapes closed.

 A figure stood on her balcony, resting against the railing, looking at her. He wore several days worth of scrub on his face, and his dark clothing was ripped in several places. He carried a deep black sword.

 She jumped, eyes wide.

 “You,” he said in an angry voice, “are causing a lot of trouble.”

 She opened her mouth to scream, but the drapes snapped forward, wrapping around her neck and mouth. They squeezed tightly, choking off her air, then curled around her entire body, pinning her arms to her sides.

 No! she thought. I survive the attack and the Lifeless, and then fall in my own room?

 She tried to call for Denth or the others. She waited, struggling, hoping someone would hear her thrashing and come for her.

 But nobody did. At least, not before she fell unconscious.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-six

 I will not leave you, Susebron wrote. I promise.

 “How can you be sure?” Siri asked. She lay on the bed, reclining so that she could see what he wrote on his pad as he sat on the floor beside the bed, his back propped up by pillows.

 “Maybe you’ll change,” she continued. “Maybe, once you have an heir, you’ll do what the storyteller said. You’ll grow tired of life, then give away your Breath.”

 First of all, he wrote, I’m still not even sure how I would get an heir. You refuse to explain it to me, and you will not answer my questions.

 “They’re embarrassing!” Siri said, feeling her short hair grow red.

 Secondly, he wrote, I cannot give away my Breath, not if what you’ve explained about BioChroma is true.

 He’s getting much more articulate in his writing, Siri thought as she watched him erase. It’s such a shame that he’s been trapped and locked up like this his entire life.

 “I really don’t know that much about it,” she said out loud. “BioChroma isn’t exactly something we focus on in Idris. I suspect that half of the things I know are rumors and exaggerations. In fact, from asking around down here, I’m getting the feeling that even the people of Hallandren don’t understand it that well.”

 He paused, then continued writing. This is all very silly. We argue something that is unimportant. I will not change. I am not going to suddenly decide to kill myself. You do not need to worry.

 She sighed.

 Siri, he wrote, I lived for fifty years with no information, no knowledge, barely able to communicate. Can you really think that I would kill myself now? Now, when I’ve discovered how to write? When I’ve discovered someone to talk to? When I’ve discovered you?

 She smiled. “All right,” she said, “I believe you. But I still think we have to worry about your priests doing something to take your power, leaving you dead.”

 He didn’t respond, looking away.

 Why is he so cursedly loyal to them? she thought with frustration.

 Finally, he looked back at her. Would you grow your hair?

 She raised an eyebrow. “And, what color am I to make it?”

 Red, he wrote.

 “You Hallandrens and your bright colors,” she said, shaking her head. “Do you realize that my people considered red the most flagrant of all colors?”

 He paused. I’m sorry, he wrote. I did not mean to offend you. I--

 He broke off as she reached down and touched his arm. “No,” she said. “Look, I wasn’t arguing. I was just being flirtatious. I’m sorry.”

 Flirtatious? he wrote. My storybook doesn’t mention this term.

 “I know,” Siri said. “It’s too full of stories about children getting eaten by trees and things.”

 The stories are metaphors meant to teach children to be--

 “Yes, I know,” she said, interrupting him again.

 So, what is flirtatious?

 “It’s. . . .” Colors! How do I get myself into these situations? “It’s when a girl acts hesitant--or sometimes overly silly--in order to make a man pay more attention to her.”

 Why would that make a man pay attention to her?

 “Well, like this.” She looked at him, leaning forward a bit. “Do you want me to grow my hair?”

 Yes.

 “Do you really want me to?”

 Of course.

 “Well then, if I must,” she said, tossing her head and commanding her hair become a deep auburn red. It flushed mid-toss, flaring from yellow to red like ink bleeding into a pool of clear water.

 Then, she made it grow. She wasn’t certain how she did it. Normal people didn’t have the ability, she knew, but to her it was instinctive. It was like flexing a muscle--one she’d been using a lot lately, since she tended to cut her hair off in the evenings rather than spending the time combing it.

 She shook her head again, growing the hair quickly, giving it a slight curl. Even as it whipped her face, it grew in length. She tossed her head, one final time--the hair making it feel more heavy, her neck warm from the locks which now tumbled down around her shoulders and down her back, twisting in light curls.

 Susebron looked at her with wide eyes. She met them, then tried a seductive glance. The result seemed so ridiculous to her, however, that she just found herself laughing. She fell back on the bed, newly-grown hair flaring around her.

 Susebron tapped her leg. She looked over at him, and he stood up, sitting on the side of the bed so that she could see his tablet as he wrote.

 You are very strange, he said.

 She smiled. “I know. I’m not meant to be seductive, Seb. I can’t maintain a straight face.”

 Seductive, he wrote. I know that word. It is used in a story when the evil queen tries to tempt the young prince with something, though I don’t know what.

 She smiled.

 I think she must have been planning to offer him food.

 “Yeah,” Siri said. “Good interpretation, there. Right on.”

 He paused. She wasn’t offering food, was she?

 Siri smiled again.

 He flushed. I feel like such an idiot, sometimes. There are so many things that everyone else--the priests, the supplicants at court, the people--understand intrinsically. Yet, I have only the stories of a children’s book to guide me. I’ve read them so often, yet it’s still hard to separate myself--and the way I view them--from the child I was when I first read them.

 He began to erase furiously. She sat up, then laid a hand on his arm.

 I know that there are things I’m missing, he wrote. Things that embarrass you, and I have guesses. I am not a fool. And yet, I get frustrated. With flirtation and sarcasm--both things where you apparently act opposite of what you want--I fear that I will never understand you.

 He stared with frustration at his board, wiping cloth held in one hand, charcoal in the other. The fire cracked quietly in the fireplace, throwing waves of too-bright yellow against his clean-shaven face.

 “I’m sorry,” she said, scooting closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his elbow, laying her head against his upper arm. He actually didn’t seem that much bigger than her, now that she was used to it. There had been men back in Idris who had stood some six and a half feet tall, and Susebron was only a few inches taller than they. Plus, because his size was proportional, he didn’t seem spindly like they had. He was normal, just larger.

 He glanced at her as she rested her head on his arm, just below the shoulder, and closed her eyes. “I think you are doing better than you think, all things considered. Most people back in my homeland didn’t understand me half as well as you do.”

 He began to write, and she opened her eyes.

 I find that hard to believe.

 “It’s true,” she said. “They kept telling me to become someone else.”

 Who?

 “My sister,” she said with a sigh. “The woman you were supposed to marry. She was everything the daughter of a king should be. Controlled, soft spoken, kind, obedient, learned.”

 She sounds boring, he wrote, smiling.

 “Vivenna is a wonderful person,” Siri said. “She was always very kind to me--far more understanding than my parents. It’s just that. . .well, I think even she felt that I should have been more reserved.”

 I can’t understand that, he wrote. You’re wonderful. So full of life and excitement. The priests and servants of the palace, they wear colors, but there’s no color inside of them. They just go about their duties, eyes down, solemn. You’ve got color on the inside, so much of it that it bursts out and colors everything around you.

 She smiled. “That sounds like BioChroma.”

 You are more honest than BioChroma, he wrote. My Breath, it makes things more bright, but it isn’t mine. It was given to me. Yours is your own.

 She felt her hair shift from the deep red into a golden, and she sighed softly with contentment, pulling herself a little more closely to him.

 How do you do that? He wrote.

 “Do what?”

 Change your hair.

 “That one was unconscious,” she said. “It goes yellow if I feel happy or content.

 You’re happy, then? He wrote. With me?

 “Of course,” she said.

 But, when you speak of the mountains, there is such longing in your voice.

 “I miss them,” she said. “But, if I left here, I’d miss you too. Sometimes, you can’t have everything you want, since the wants contradict each other.”

 Their conversation fell silent for a time, and he set aside his board, hesitantly wrapping his arm around her and resting back against the bed’s headboard. She only half-successfully kept the blushful twinge of red out of her hair as she realized that they were still sitting on the bed, and she was snuggling up beside him.

 But, well, she thought, we are married, after all.

 The only thing that spoiled the moment was the occasional rumbling of her stomach. After a few minutes, Susebron reached for his board.

 You are hungry? he wrote.

 “No,” she said. “My stomach is an anarchist; it likes to growl when it’s full.”

 He paused. Sarcasm? he wrote.

 “A poor attempt,” she said. “It’s all right--I’ll survive.”

 Did you not eat before you came to my chambers?

 “I did,” she said. “But growing that much hair is a little draining. It always leaves me hungry.”

 It makes you hungry every night? He asked, writing quickly. And you didn’t say anything.

 She shrugged.

 I will get you food.

 “No, we can’t afford to expose ourselves.”

 Expose what? he wrote. I am God King--I can get food whenever I wish it. I have sent for it at night before. This will not be odd. He stood, walking toward the doorway.

 “Wait!” she said.

 He turned, glancing back at him.

 “You can’t go to the door like that, Susebron,” she said, keeping her voice quiet, in case someone was listening. “You’re still fully dressed.”

 He looked down, then frowned.

 “Make your clothing look disheveled at least,” she said, quickly hiding his writing board.

 He undid his neck buttons, then threw off his deep black overrobe, revealing a white undergown beneath. Like everything white near him, it gave off a halo of rainbow colors. He reached up, mussing his dark hair, then wrinkled up the undergown a bit. He turned back to her, eyes questioning.

 “Good enough,” she said, pulling the bed sheets up to her neck. Then, she watched curiously as Susebron rapped on the door with his knuckles.

 It immediately opened. He’s too important to open his own door, Siri thought. Yet, he isn’t even allowed to speak with those around him.

 Indeed, the way he commanded food was by putting a hand to his stomach, then pointing away. The servants--barely visible to Siri through the doorway--scuttled away at his order. He turned as the door closed, walking back to sit beside her on the bed.

 Barely a few minutes later, servants arrived at the room with a dining table and a chair. They set the table with large amounts of food--everything from roasted fish to pickled vegetables and simmering shellfish.

 Siri watched with amazement. They had it all ready, she thought. There’s no way they fixed it that quickly. They simply had it waiting in the kitchens, should their God happen to grow hungry.

 It was wasteful to the point of extravagance, but it was also wondrous. It bespoke a lifestyle that her people back in Idris couldn’t have even imagined. It was representative of an odd balance to the world. Siri had seen the starving poor occasionally. It was a counterpoint to them that there was a man so wealthy that most meals fixed for him, he never even saw.

 The servants set only one chair at the table, of course. Siri watched as they brought in plate after plate. They couldn’t know what the God King wanted, so they apparently brought him some of everything. They filled the table, then retreated as Susebron pointed for them to go.

 The scents were almost too much for Siri in her hungered state. She waited, tense, until the door closed. Then, she threw off the sheets and rushed over, wearing only her shift, as usual.

 She scanned the feast. She had thought the meals prepared for her were extravagant, but they were nothing compared to this. Susebron gestured toward the chair.

 “Aren’t you going to eat?” she asked.

 He shrugged.

 She paused, then walked over and took one of the blankets from the bed. Then, she spread it on the stone floor. “What looks good to you?” she said, approaching the table.

 He pointed at the plate of simmering mussels and several of the breads. She moved these, along with a dish that didn’t appear to have any fish in it--though she couldn’t be certain, since it was a bowl of exotic fruits tossed in some kind of creamy sauce--to the cloth. Then, she sat down and began eating.

 Susebron carefully situated himself on the floor. He managed to look dignified even when wearing only his underrobe. Siri reached over and handed him his board.

 This is very odd, he said.

 “What?” she asked. “Eating on the floor?”

 He nodded. Dining is always such a production for me. I eat some of what is on a plate, then servants pull it away and wipe my face, then bring me another one. I never get to finish an entire dish, even if I like it.

 Siri snorted. “I’m surprised they don’t hold the spoon for you.”

 They did when I was younger, Susebron wrote, flushing. I eventually got them to let me do it myself. It’s hard, when you can’t speak with anyone.

 “I can imagine,” Siri said between mouthfuls. She eyed Susebron, who ate with small, reserved bites. She felt a slight stab of shame at how fast she was eating, then paused, and decided she didn’t care. She put aside the fruit dish, stood, and took several pastries off of the table.

 Susebron eyed her as she began to eat one after another. Those are Pahn Kahl crispbreads, he wrote. You are take only small bites, making sure to eat a piece of bread between to wash away the taste. They are a delicasy and--

 He broke off as Siri picked up an entire pastry and shoved it into her mouth. She smiled at him, then continued chewing.

 After a moment of looking stunned, he wrote on his board again. You realize that children in the stories who gorged themselves usually ended up being thrown off of cliffs.

 Siri stuffed another crispbread into her mouth beside the first, dusting her fingers and face with powdered sugar in the process.

 Susebron watched her, then reached over and took a whole one himself. He shoved it into his mouth.

 Siri laughed, nearly spitting out bits of pastry onto the blanket. “And so my corruption of the God King continues,” she said once she could speak.

 He smiled. This is very curious, he wrote, eating another crispbread. Then another. Then another.

 Siri watched him, raising an eyebrow. “One would think that as God King, you would at least be able to eat sweets whenever you want.”

 There are many rules pressed upon me that others need not follow, he wrote as he chewed. The stories explained this. Much is required of a prince or a king. I would rather have been born a peasant.

 Siri raised an eyebrow. She had a feeling that he’d be surprised if he actually had to experience things like hunger, poverty, or even discomfort. However, she left him to his ideas. Who was she to chastise?

 You are the one who was hungry, he wrote. But I am the one doing all the eating!

 “They obviously don’t feed you enough,” Siri said, trying a slice of the regular bread.

 He shrugged, continuing to eat. She watched him, her thoughts turning again to the servants and Susebron’s interaction with them.

 We can’t just keep going on like this, she thought. Playing around at night, pretending like the world isn’t going on without us. We’re going to get crushed.

 “Susebron,” she said. “I think we need to find a way to expose what your priests have been doing to you.”

 He looked up, then wrote, What do you mean?

 “I mean that we should have you try to talk to the common people,” she said. “Or maybe some of the other Gods. The priests gain all of their power by associating with you. If you choose to communicate through someone else, it would overthrow them.”

 Do we need to do that?

 “Pretend with me for a moment that we do,” she said, sighing.

 Very well, he wrote. However, there is another problem with that plan. How, exactly, would I communicate with someone else? I can’t exactly stand up and begin shouting.

 She paused. “I don’t know. Notes, perhaps?”

 He smiled. There is a story about that in my book. A princess trapped in a tower who throws notes out into the ocean waters. The king of the fishes finds them.

 “I doubt the king of fishes cares about our predicament,” Siri said flatly.

 Such a creature is only slightly less fantastic than the possibility of my notes being found and interpreted correctly. If I threw them out the window or dropped, nobody would believe that the God King had written them.

 “And if you passed them to servants?”

 He frowned. Assuming that you are right, and that my priests are working against me, then wouldn’t it be foolhardy to trust the servants they employ?

 “Perhaps. We could try a Pahn Kahl servant.”

 None of them attend me, for I am the God King, he wrote. Besides, what if we did get a servant or two on our side? How would that expose the priests to the common people and the other gods? Nobody would believe a Phan Khal servant who contradicted the priests.

 She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I suppose you could try making a scene, running away or causing a distraction.”

 When outside of the palace, I am constantly attended by a troop of hundreds. Awakeners, soldiers, guards, priests, and Lifeless warriors. Do you honestly think I could make any kind of a scene without being rushed away before I could communicate with anyone?

 “No,” she admitted. “But, we have to do something! There has to be a way out of this.”

 I do not see one. We need to work with the priests, not against them. Perhaps they know more about why the God Kings die. They could tell us--I can speak to them, using the Artisan’s Script.

 “No,” Siri said. “Not yet. Let me think about this first.”

 Very well, he wrote, then tried another pastry.

 “Susebron. . . .” she finally said. “Would you consider running away with me? Back to Idris?”

 He frowned. Perhaps, he finally wrote. That seems extreme.

 “What if I could prove that the priests are trying to kill you? And if I could provide a way out--someone to smuggle us from the palace and out of the city?”
 The concept obviously bothered him. If it is the only way, he wrote, then I will go with you. But I do not believe that we will get to that point.

 “I hope you’re right,” she said. But if you’re not, she thought, then we’re escaping. We’ll take our chances back with my family, war or no war.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-seven

 Vivenna awoke sore, tired, and terrified. She struggled immediately, but her hands and legs were tied, and she only succeeded in rolling herself into a less comfortable position.

 She was in a dark room, her face--gagged--pressing awkwardly against a splintering wood floor. She still wore her dress, one of the expensive foreign ones that Denth had complained about. Her hands were tied behind her, and she was no longer in her rooms. This place was far more run down; she could tell that even from the floor.

 Someone was in the room with her. Someone with a lot of BioChroma. She could feel it without even concentrating.

 She twisted, rolling on her back with an awkward motion. The room was dark, but she could see a figure silhouetted against a starlit sky, standing on a balcony a short distance away.

 It was him.

 He turned back toward her, face dark in the unlit room, and she began to squirm with panic. What was this man planning to do with her? Horrible possibilities appeared in her mind.

 The man walked toward her, feet thumping roughly on the floor. He knelt down, pulling her face up next to his.

 “I’m still deciding whether or not to kill you, princess,” he said. “If I were you, I’d avoid doing anything more to antagonize me.”

 His voice was deep, thick, and had an accent she couldn’t quite place. She froze in his grip, trembling slightly, hair bleached white despite herself. He appeared to be studying her, eyes reflecting starlight. Then, he dropped her back to the wooden floor.

 She groaned through the gag as he quietly lit a lantern, then pushed closed the wooden balcony doors. He reached to his belt and removed a large hunting dagger. Vivenna felt a stab of fear, but he simply cut the bonds on her hands.

 He tossed the dagger aside, and it made a thock as it stuck into the wood of the far wall. Then, he reached for something on the bed. His large, black hilted sword.

 Vivenna scrambled back, hands free, and pulled at her gag, intending to scream. He whipped the sword toward her, making her freeze.

 “You will remain quiet,” he said sharply.

 She huddled back into the corner. How is this happening to me? she thought. A piece of her was too shocked to even think. Why hadn’t she fled back to Idris long ago? She’d been deeply unsettled when Denth had killed the ruffians in the restaurant. She’d known, then, that she was dealing with things that were truly dangerous.

 She should have run. She’d been arrogant to think that she could do anything in this city. This monstrous, overwhelming, terrible city. She was nothing. Barely a peasant from the countryside to these people. Why had she been so foolish as to get herself involved in their politics and their schemes?

 The man, Vasher, stepped forward. He undid the clasp on that deep, black sword, and Vivenna felt a strange nausea strike her. It seemed that a thin wisp of black smoke began to rise from the blade, which was still hidden within its silver sheath.

 Vasher approached, tip of the sword dragging against the floor behind him, backlit by the lantern. Then, oddly, he tossed the sword to the ground in front of Vivenna.

 “Pick it up,” he said.

 She untensed slightly, looking up, though she still huddled in the corner. She felt tears on her cheeks.

 “Pick up the sword, princess,” he commanded again.

 It seemed like a good idea. She had no training with weapons, but if she could take it from him. . . . She reached for the sword, but felt her nausea grow far stronger. She groaned, her arm twitching and convulsing as it approached the strange black blade.

 She shied away.

 “Pick it up!” Vasher bellowed.

 She complied with a gagged cry of desperation, grabbing the weapon, feeling a terrible sickness travel like a wave up her arm and into her stomach. She couldn’t hold it for more than a second, and she found herself ripping away her gag with desperate fingers.

 Hello, a voice said in her head. Would you like to kill someone today?

 She dropped the horrid thing and fell to her knees, retching onto the floor in front of her. There wasn’t much in her stomach, but she couldn’t stop herself. When she was done, she crawled away and huddled down against the wall again, mouth dripping with bile, feeling too sick to yell for help.

 She was crying again. That seemed the least of her humiliations.

 Through teary eyes, she watched as Vasher stood quietly in place. Then, he grunted--as if in surprise--and picked up the sword. He clicked the clasp on its sheath, locking the weapon back inside, then threw a towel onto the stinking bile.

 “We are in one of the slums,” he said. “You may scream if you wish, but nobody will think anything of it. Except me. I’ll be annoyed.”

 He glanced back at her. “I warn you. I’m not known for my ability to keep my temper.”

 Vivenna shivered, still feeling hints of nausea. This man held even more BioChroma than she did. She’d seen that before, when she’d caught him watching her. Yet, when he’d kidnapped her, she hadn’t felt anyone standing in her room. How had he hidden it?

 And, what had been that voice?

 They seemed silly things to distract her, considering her current situation. However, she used them as a focus, trying to keep from thinking about what this man might do to her. What he might--

 He was walking toward her again. He picked up the gag, his expression dark. She finally screamed, trying to scramble away, and he cursed, putting a foot on her back and forcing her down against the floor. He tied her hands again, then forced the gag on. She cried, her voice muffled, as he jerked her backward. He stood, then slung her over his shoulder and carried her away from the room.

 “Colors-cursed slums,” he muttered. “Everyone’s too poor to afford basements.” Instead, he pushed her into a much smaller room and tied her hands to the doorknob. He stepped back, looking her over, obviously unsatisfied with the situation.

 He knelt beside her, unshaven face close to hers, breath vile. “I have work to do,” he said. “Work that you have forced me to do. You will not run. If you do, I’ll find you and kill you. Understand?”

 She nodded weakly.

 He clomped away. She caught sight of him retrieving his sword from the other room, then he quickly rushed down the stairs, moving with an urgency that bespoke another appointment.

 The door below slammed and locked, leaving her alone.

#

 An hour or so later, Vivenna had finished crying herself dry. She sat, slumped, hands tied awkwardly above her.

 Part of her kept waiting for the others to find her. Denth, Tonk Fah, Jewels. They were experts. Competent. They’d be able to track her down and save her.

 Yet, no rescue came. As she thought--dazed, drowsy, and sick--she was forced to admit something. This man--this Vasher--was someone that even Denth had feared. Vasher had killed one of their friends some months before. He was at least as skilled as they were.

 How did they all end up here, then? she thought, her hands beginning to feel rubbed raw. It seems an awful coincidence. Perhaps Vasher had followed them to the city, and was acting out of some kind of twisted rivalry by working against them.

 They’ll find me and save me.

 But, they wouldn’t. She knew that they wouldn’t, not if Vasher were as dangerous as they said. He’d know how to hide from Denth. After all, Vasher had managed to sneak into her rooms and spirit her away under their very noses.

 If she were going to escape, she’d have to do it herself. The concept frightened her, and she almost discarded it. Strangely, however, memories from her tutors returned to her mind.

 There are things to do if you are kidnapped, one had taught. Things that every princess should know.

 During her time in T’Telir, she’d begin to feel that the tutelage that she’d received during her childhood was useless. Now, however, she was surprised to find herself remembering things that related directly to her situation.

 If a person kidnaps you and keeps you bound, the tutor had taught, your best time to escape is near the beginning, when you are still strong. They will keep you starved and beat you down, and soon you will be too weak to flee.

 Do not expect to be rescued, though some people will undoubtedly be working to help you. And, never expect to be exchanged for a ransom. Most kidnappings end in death.

 The best thing you can do for your country is try to flee as quickly as possible. You may escape. If you don’t, the captor may be forced to kill you. That is preferable to what you will likely be forced to endure when held captive. Plus, if you die, the kidnappers will no longer have a hostage.

 It was a harsh, blunt lesson--but many of her lessons had been that way. Better to die for the good of the country than to be held captive and ransomed against it. That had been the lesson that warned her that the Hallandrens might try to use her against Idris. And, she was told that if such a thing happened, her father might be forced to order her assassination.

 That was a problem she really didn’t have to worry about anymore. The kidnapping advice, however, seemed useful. It frightened her, made her want to cower back and simply wait, hoping that Vasher would find a reason to let her go. However, the more she thought, the more she knew that she had to be strong.

 He’d been extremely harsh with her--perhaps exaggeratedly so. He’d wanted to frighten her so that she wouldn’t want to escape. He’d cursed not having a cellar, for that would have been a secure place to dump her. That implied that he didn’t trust leaving her where he had.

 When he returned--when he wasn’t so pressed for time--he would probably move her to a safer location. The tutors were right. The only chance she had to escape was now, when she was still strong.

 Her hands were held tightly, however. She’d tried wiggling them free several times already. Vasher knew his knots. She wiggled a bit more, rubbing more skin off of her wrists, and she cringed in pain. Blood began to drip down her wrist, but even the slickness of that wasn’t enough to get her hands free.

 She began to cry again, not in fear, but in pain and frustration. She couldn’t wiggle her way out.

 But. . .could she perhaps make the ropes untie themselves?

 I don’t know how to do it, she thought. My BioChroma. Why didn’t I let Denth train me earlier?

 Her stubborn self-righteousness seemed even more flagrant to her now. Of course it was better to use the BioChroma than it was to be killed--or worse--by Vasher. She thought she understood Lemks, and his desire to gather enough BioChroma to extend his life, as she tried to speak some Commands through her gag.

 But, that was useless. What she knew of Awakening was sparse, but even she understood that the Commands had to be spoken clearly.

 She began to wiggle her chin, pushing on the gag with her tongue. It didn’t appear to be as tight as her wrist bonds. Plus, it was wet from her tears and her saliva. She worked at it, straining her jaw, moving her lips and her teeth, working the bond free. She was actually surprised when it finallydropped down below her chin, loose.

 She licked her lips, working her sore jaw. Now what? she thought. Her apprehension was rising. Now she really needed to get free. If Vasher returned and saw that she’d managed to work her gag off, she knew that he’d never leave her with such an opportunity again. Plus, she suspected that he’d punish her for disobeying him.

 “Ropes,” she said. “Untie yourself.”

 Nothing happened.

 She gritted her teeth, trying to remember the Commands that Denth had told her. He had only taught her two. Hold Things and Protect Me. Neither seemed all that useful in her situation. She certainly didn’t want the ropes to hold her wrists more tightly.

 However, he had said something else. Something about imagining what you wanted in your mind. She tried that, picturing the ropes untying themselves.

 “Untie yourselves,” she said clearly.

 Again, nothing happened.

 Vivenna leaned her head back in annoyance. Awakening seemed such a vague art, which was odd, considering the amount of rules and restrictions it appeared to have. Or, maybe it was just vague to her because it was so complicated.

 She closed her eyes. I have to get this, she thought. I must figure it out. If I don’t, I will be killed.

 She opened her eyes, focusing on her bonds. She pictured them untying again, but somehow that felt wrong to her. She felt like a child, sitting and staring at a leaf, trying to make it move just by concentrating on it.

 That wasn’t the way her newfound senses worked. They were part of her. So, instead of concentrating, she relaxed, letting her unconscious mind do the work. A little like she did when she changed the color of her hair.

 “Untie,” she Commanded.

 The Breath flowed from her. It was like. . .blowing bubbles beneath the water, exhaling a piece of herself, but feeling it flow into something else. Something that became part of her--a limb she could only slightly control. It was more of a sense of the rope than an ability to move it.

 As the Breath left her, she could feel the world dull slightly around her, colors becoming slightly less bold, the wind a little more difficult to hear, the life of the city a little more distant.

 The ropes around her hands jerked, causing her wrists to burn, then unraveled and drpped to the ground. Her arms came lose, and she sat, staring at her wrists, a little shocked.

 Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought. I did it. She wasn’t certain whether to be impressed with herself or ashamed.

 Either way, she knew she needed to run. She untied her ankles, then scrambled to her feet, noticing that a section of the wooden door had been completely drained of color in a circular pattern around her hands. She paused only briefly, then grabbed the rope off the ground and ran down the stairs. She peeked out the doorway onto the street, but it was dark, and she could see little.

 Taking a deep breath, she rushed out into the night.

#

 She walked aimlessly for a time, her only concern that of putting space between herself and Vasher’s lair. She knew that she should probably find a place to hide, but she was afraid to do so. She was distinctive in her fine dress, and would be remembered by all who passed. Her only real hope was to get out of the slums and into the city proper, where hopefully she could find her way back to Denth and the others.

 She carried the rope in her pocket. She felt a wrongness about her. She’d grown so accustomed to having a certain amount of Breath that missing a bit of it, even the small bit contained in the rope, felt wrong. As if her mind were slightly dulled and foggy.

 Awakeners could recover Breath they invested into objects; she’d been tutored on that. She just didn’t know the Commands to do it. So, she brought the rope with her, hoping that Denth would be able to help her recover its Breath.

 She tried to keep to the larger streets--which was hard, in the slums. Sometimes, she’d be walking along a wide, open street, and it would inexplicably narrow into something the size of an alleyway. Never had she missed Idris so soundly, with its single main thoroughfares and wide open cities.

 She maintained a quick pace, head down, trying to watch for a discarded cloak or piece of cloth she could wrap around herself to hide the dress. Fortunately, it seemed as if the hour were too late, even, for most of the ruffians she had seen on the slums during previous visits. She did occasionally pass shadowed figures on the sides of the road, and she had trouble keeping her heart stilled as she passed them.

 Eventually, someone was going to decide that her rich dress probably meant a rich coin pouch, and she would find herself in a situation just as bad as the one she had left. She hurried her step, rubbing her bloody wrists, her exhaustion pushed away by tension.

 If only the sun were up! she thought with frustration. It was beginning to grow light with morning’s arrival, but it was still dark enough that she had trouble telling which direction she was going. The slums were convoluted enough that she felt she were going in circles. She. . . .

 Vivenna paused, frowning. The street around her looked familiar. Did that mean she’d passed it recently? There were no street lamps or other lights in the slums, but the light of false dawn was enough. She could have sworn that she recognized the building in front of her.

 I do recognize it, she realized. I stared out a window, looking at it for several hours. I recognize the way the broken door hangs, the pattern of the windows, the faded colors. That means. . . .

 She turned around. Denth’s safe house--the one they’d visited both after the attack in the restaurant and the attack in the slums--lay huddled between two larger buildings across from her.

 Blessed Austre! She thought with relief, quickly crossing the street and pushing her way into the building. The main room was empty, and she hurriedly opened the door down to the cellar, seeking a place to hide. Perhaps they would come here looking for her.

 She searched around with her fingers, and sure enough, she found a lantern with flint and steel beside the stairway. She pulled the door closed, and found it more sturdy than she would have assumed. That felt good, though she couldn’t lock it from this side. She left it unlatched, then, and bent down to light the lantern.

 A set of worn, broken stairs led down into the cellar. Vivenna paused, remembering that Denth had warned her about the steps. She walked down carefully, feeling them creak beneath her, and could see why he’d been worried. Still, she made it down all right. At the bottom, she wrinkled her nose at the musty scent. A couple of small game corpses hung from the wall; someone had been here recently, which was a good sign.

 She rounded the stairs. The main space of the cellar was built beneath the floor of the upper room. She would rest there for a few hours or so, and if Denth didn’t arrive, she’d venture out. Then she--

 She froze, jerking to a halt, lantern swinging in her hand. Its hesitant light shone on a figure sitting before her, head bowed, face shadowed. His arms were tied behind his back, and his legs were tied to the legs of the chair.

 “Peprin?” Vivenna asked with shock, rushing to his side. She quickly set down the lantern, then paused. There was blood on the floor.

 “Peprin!” she said louder, urgently lifting his head. His eyes stared forward, sightless, his face scratched and bloody.

 Her BioChromatic senses couldn’t feel him. There was no life in those eyes.

 Vivenna’s hand began to shake. She stumbled back, horrified. “Oh, colors,” she found herself mumbling. “Colors, colors, colors. . . .”

 A hand fell on her shoulder. She screamed, spinning. A large figure stood in the darkness behind her, half hidden beneath the stairs.

 “Hello, princess,” Tonk Fah said. He smiled.

 Vivenna stumbled back, nearly colliding with Peprin’s body. She began to gasp, hand at her chest. Only then did she notice the bodies on the walls.

 Not game animals, caught and waiting to be eaten. What she had mistaken for a pheasant in the dim light of her lantern now reflected back green. A dead parrot. A monkey hung beside, body sliced and cut. The freshest corpse was that of a large lizard. All had been tortured.

 “Oh, Austre,” she mumbled, too shocked to comprehend what she was seeing.

 Tonk Fah stepped forward, grabbing for her, and Vivenna finally shocked herself into motion. She ducked to the side, running into the dirt wall but escaping his reach. She ran around the large man, scrambling toward the stairs. She came up short as she collided with someone’s chest.

 She looked up, blinking.

 “Do you know what I hate most about being a mercenary, princess?” Denth asked quietly, grabbing her arm. “Fulfilling the stereotypes. Everyone assumes that they can’t trust you. The thing is, they really can’t.”

 “We do what we’re paid to,” Tonk Fah said, stepping up behind her.

 “It’s not exactly the most enviable work,” Denth said, holding her tightly. “But it the money is good. I was hoping we wouldn’t have to do this. Everything was going so nicely. Why did you have to run away?”

 He pushed her forward with a careful hand, still holding her, as Jewels and Clod moved down the steps behind him. The stairs groaned beneath the weight.

 “You’ve been lying to me the entire time,” she whispered, tears almost unnoticed on her cheeks, heart beating as she tried to make sense of the world. “Why?”

 “Kidnapping is hard work,” Denth said.

 “Terrible business,” Tonk Fah added.

 “It’s better if your subject never even knows they’ve been kidnapped.”

 They always kept an eye on me. Staying near. “Lemks. . . .”

 “Didn’t do what we needed him to,” Denth said. “Poison was too good a death for that one. You should have known, princess. With as much Breath as he held. . . .”

 He couldn’t have died from sickness, she realized. Or from old age. Austre! Her mind was numb. She glanced at Peprin.

 He’s dead. Peprin is dead. They killed him.

 “Don’t look at him,” Denth said, delicately turning her head away from the corpse. “Listen to me, princess. You’ll be all right. We won’t hurt you. Just tell me why you ran away. Peprin claimed not to know where you had gone. Did you really leave without telling him? Why? What made you suspect us?”

 She shook her head dumbly.

 “This is important, princess,” Denth said calmly. “I need to know. Who did you contact? What did you tell the slum lords about me?” He began to squeeze her arm tightly.

 “We wouldn’t want to have to break anything,” Tonk Fah said. “You Idrians. You break too easily.”

 What had once seemed lighthearted banter to her now held an edge of danger. Tonk Fah loomed in the shadowy lanternlight to her right, Denth a thinner form in front of her. She remembered his speed, the way he’d slain those bodyguards at the restaurant.

 Remembered the way they’d destroyed Lemks’s house. Remembered their callousness toward death. They’d hidden it all behind a slight veil of humor.

 “Why?” she asked again. “You seemed like my friends.”

 “We are,” Denth said. “I like you quite a bit, princess.” He smiled--a genuine smile, not a dangerous leer, like Tonk Fah was giving her. “If it means anything, I do apologize. But, well, a job is a job. We do what we’re paid to do. I explained this all to you several times, I seemed to recall.”

 “I never really believed. . . .” she whispered.

 “They never do,” Tonk Fah said.

 Vivenna blinked. Get away quickly. While you still have strength.

 She’d escaped once. Wasn’t that enough? Didn’t she deserve some peace?

 Quickly!
 She twisted her arm, slapping it against the back of Tonk Fah’s cloak, preparing to release her breath. “Grab--”

 Denth, however, was to fast. He yanked her back, snatching her other hand, holding it tightly. Tonk Fah stood surprised as his cloak bled free of color, turning grey, and Vivenna’s Breath was pulled into it. Yet, without a Command, that Breath didn’t do anything. It was expended, but wasted, and Vivenna felt the world around her grow slightly more dull.

 Denth slapped Tonk Fah on the back of the head in annoyance.

 “Hey,” Tonk Fah said, rubbing his head.

 “Pay attention,” Denth said. Then, he glanced at Vivenna. “Thanks for reminding me about your Breath, Princess. I’m sorry you had to get it. I was really looking forward to holding it myself. Let’s deal with that first.”

 Clod stepped up beside Denth, grey eyes staring forward, empty as always. Except. . .could she see something in them? Was she making it up? Her emotions were so strained lately that she really couldn’t trust them. Clod seemed to meet her eyes.

 She felt like she should be crying in frustration. She felt too numb.

 “Now,” Denth said, face growing harder. “Repeat after me. My Breath to yours. My Life become yours.”

 Vivenna looked up at him, meeting his eyes. “Howl of the sun,” she whispered.

 Denth frowned. “What?”

 “Attack Denth.”

 “I--” Denth began. At that moment, Clod’s fist hit his face.

 The blow threw Denth to the side and into Tonk Fah, who cursed and stumbled. Vivenna wrenched free, ducking past Clod--nearly tripping on her dress--and threw her shoulder into the surprised Jewels.

 Jewels fell. Vivenna scrambled up the stairs.

 “You let her hear the Command phrase?” Denth yelled in anger, sounds of struggle coming from where he was wrestling with Clod.

 Jewels gained her feet, and followed after Vivenna. The woman’s foot broke through a step, however, as she scrambled up. Vivenna tumbled into the room above, then kicked the door shut. She reached over, throwing the latch.

 Won’t hold them for long, she thought, feeling helpless. They’ll keep coming. Chasing me. Just like Vasher.

 God of Colors. What am I going to do?

 She didn’t have time to think about that at the moment. She rushed out onto the street, the dawn light now illuminating the city, and ducked down an alleyway.

 Then, she just kept running--this time trying to pick the smallest, and dirtiest, alleyways she could.

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-eight

 Lightsong sat, sweating, staring down at the floor in front of him. He was breathing heavily.

 Llarimar eyed a lesser scribe, who lowered his pen hesitantly. Servants clustered around the edges of the bed chamber. They had, at his request, woken him up unusually early in the morning. He hadn’t anticipated the dreams.

 “Your grace?” Llarimar asked.

 It’s nothing, Lightsong thought. I dream of war because I’m thinking about it. Not because of prophesy. Not because I’m a God.

 It felt so real. In the dream he had been a man, on the battlefield, with no weapon. Soldiers had died around him. Friend after friend. He had known them, each one close to him.

 A war that we wage wouldn’t even be like that, he thought. It would be fought by our Lifeless, for the most part.

 He didn’t want to acknowledge that his friends during the dream hadn’t been wearing bright colors. He hadn’t been seeing through the eyes of a Hallandren soldier. Perhaps that was why it had been such a slaughter.

 It wouldn’t be, he thought. The Idrians are the ones threatening us. They’re the rebels who broke off, maintaining a second throne inside of Hallandren borders. They need to be quelled.

 They deserve it.

 “What did you see, your grace?” Llarimar asked again.

 Lightsong closed his eyes. There were other images. The recurring ones. The glowing red panther. The tempest. A young woman’s face, being absorbed by darkness. Eaten alive.

 “I saw Blushweaver,” he said, speaking only of the very last part of the dreams. “Her face red and flushed. I saw you, and you were sleeping. And I saw the God King.”

 “The God King?” Llarimar asked, sounding excited.

 Lightsong nodded. “He was crying.”

 The scribe wrote the images down. Llarimar, for once, didn’t prompt further. Lightsong stood, forcing the images out of his mind. Yet, he couldn’t ignore that his body felt weak. Another week had passed. It was time for him to ingest another Breath.

 “I’m going to need some urns,” Lightsong said. “Two dozen of them or so, each painted after the colors of one of the Gods.”

 Llarimar gave the order without even asking why.

 “I’ll also need some pebbles,” Lightsong said as the servants dressed him. “Lots of them.”

 Llarimar nodded, and once he was dressed, Lightsong turned to leave the room. Off once again to feed on the soul of a child.

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 Lightsong threw a pebble into one of the urns in front of him. It made a slight ringing sound.

 “Well done, your grace,” Llarimar praised, standing beside Lightsong’s chair.

 “Nothing to it,” Lightsong said, tossing another pebble. It fell short of the intended urn, and a servant rushed forward, plucking it off the ground and depositing it in the proper container.

 “I appear to be a natural,” Lightsong noted.

 “Indeed, your grace,” Llarimar said. “I believe that her grace, the Goddess Blushweaver is approaching.”

 “Good,” Lightsong said, throwing another pebble. He hit this time. Of course, the urns were arranged only a few feet from his seat. “I should like someone for whom to show off.”

 He sat on the green of the courtyard, a cool breeze blowing, his pavilion set up just inside the Court’s gates. He could see the wall blocking wall, the one that kept him from looking out at the city proper. With the wall in the way, it was a rather depressing view.

 If they’re going to lock us in here, he thought, they could at least give us the courtesy of a decent view out.

 “What, in the name of the Iridescent tones, are you doing?”

 Lightsong didn’t need to look to know that Blushweaver was standing with hands on hips beside him. He threw another pebble.

 “You know,” he said, “it’s always struck me as strange. When we say oaths like that, we use the colors. Why not use our own names? We are, presumably, gods.”

 “Most Gods don’t like their names being used as an oath,” Blushweaver said, sitting beside him.

 “Then they are far to pompous for my taste,” Lightsong said, tossing a pebble. It missed, and a servant deposited it. “I, personally, should find it very flattering to have my name used as an oath. Lightsong the Brave! Or, by Lightsong the Brave! I suppose that’s a bit of a mouthful. Perhaps we could shorten it to simple Lightsong!”

 “I swear,” she said. “You are getting stranger by the day.”

 “No, actually,” he said. “You didn’t swear in that particular statement. Unless you think we should simply swear using the familiar pronoun. You! So, your line at this point is ‘What in the name of You are you doing?’”

 She leaned back, huffing quietly.

 He eyed her. “I certainly don’t deserve that yet. I’ve barely gotten started. Something else must be bothering you.”

 “Allmother,” she said.

 “Won’t give you the Commands?”

 “Refuses to even speak with me, now.”

 Lightsong shook his head, throwing a pebble into one of the urns. “Ah, if only she knew the utter frustration she was missing simply by refusing your acquaintance.”

 “I’m not that frustrating!” Blushweaver said. “I’ve actually been rather charming with her.”

 “Then that is your problem, I surmise,” Lightsong said. “We’re Gods, my dear, and we quickly grow tired of our immortal existences. Surely we seek for extreme ranges in emotion--good or bad, it doesn’t matter. Only the range of our emotion is important. In a way, it’s rather the absolute value of emotion that is a factor, rather than the positive or negative nature of that emotion.”

 Blushweaver paused. So did Lightsong.

 “Lightsong, dear,” she said. “What in the name of You did that mean?”

 “I’m not exactly sure,” he said, frowning. “It just kind of came out. I can visualize what it means in my head, though. With numbers.”

 “Are. . .you all right?” she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

 Images of warfare flashed in his mind. His best friend, a man he didn’t know, dying with a sword through the chest. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Things have been rather different with me lately.”

 She sat quietly for a moment. “You want to go back to my palace and frolic a bit? That always makes me feel better.”

 He tossed a pebble, smiling. “You, my dear, are incorrigible.”

 “I’m the Goddess of Lust, for the Colors sake,” she said. “I’ve got to fill the role.”

 “Last I checked,” he said. “You were goddess of Honesty.”

 “Honesty, and honest emotions, my dear,” she said sweetly. “And let me tell you, lust is one of the most honest of all emotions. Now, what are you doing with those silly pebbles?”

 “Counting,” he said.

 “Counting your insanities?”

 “That,” Lightsong said, tossing another pebble, “and counting the number of priests who come through the gates wearing the colors of each God or Goddess.”

 Blushweaver frowned, glancing at the gateway. It was mid-day, and the gates were fairly busy with the comings and goings of servants and performers. There were only occasionally priests or priestesses, however, since they would have been required to come in earlier to attend their Gods.

 “Each time a priest of a particularly God enters,” Lightsong said, “I toss a pebble into the urn representing that God’s colors.”

 Blushweaver watched him toss--and miss--with another pebble. As he’d instructed, however, the servants picked the pebble up and put it in the proper urn. Violet and silver. To the side, one of Heartmusic’s priestesses rushed across the green toward her Goddess’s palace.

 “I’m confused,” Blushweaver finally said.

 “It’s easy,” Lightsong said. “You see someone wearing purple, you throw a pebble in the urn of the same color.”

 “Yes, dear,” she said. “But why?”

 “To keep track of how many priests of each God enter the Court, of course,” Lightsong said. “They’ve slowed to nearly a trickle. Scoot, would you mind organizing the counting?”

 Llarimar bowed, then gathered several servants and scribes, ordering them to empty the urns and count the contents of each one.

 “My dear Lightsong,” Blushweaver said. “I do apologize if I’ve been ignoring you lately. Allmother has been rudely unresponsive to my suggestions. If my lack of attention has caused your fragile mind to snap. . . .”

 “My mind is quite unsnapped, thank you,” Lightsong said, sitting up, watching curiously as the servants counted.

 “Then, you must be so very bored,” Blushweaver continued. “Perhaps we can come up with something to entertain you.”

 “I’m well entertained.” He smiled, even before the counting results were in. Mercystar had one of the smallest piles.

 “Lightsong?” Blushweaver asked. Nearly all of her playful attitude was gone.

 “I ordered my priests in early today,” Lightsong said, glancing at her. “And to set up position here, in front of the gates, before the sun even rose. We’ve been counting priests for some six hours now.”

 Llarimar walked over, handing Lightsong a list of the Gods and the number of priests who had entered wearing their colors. Lightsong scanned it, nodding to himself.

 “Some of the Gods have had over a hundred priests report for service. Yet, a couple of them have had barely a dozen. Mercystar is one of those.”

 “So?” Blushweaver asked.

 “So,” Lightsong said. “I’m going to send my servants to watch and count at Mercystar’s palace, keeping track of the number of priests who are there. I already suspect that I know what they’ll find, however. Mercystar doesn’t have fewer priests than the rest of us. They’re just getting into the Court by a different route.”

 Blushweaver paused. “The tunnels,” she finally said.

 Lightsong nodded.

 Blushweaver leaned back, sighing. “Well, at least you’re not insane or bored. You’re just obsessed.”

 “Something’s going on with those tunnels,” he said. “And it involves the servant who was murdered a few weeks back.”

 “Lightsong, we have much bigger problems to worry about!” Blushweaver shook her head, holding her forehead. “I can’t believe that you’re still bothering with this. Honestly! The kingdom is about to go to war--for the first time, your position in the Court is important--and you’re worrying about how priests are getting into the Court?”

 Lightsong didn’t respond immediately. “Here,” he finally said, let me prove my point to you.”

 He reached over to the side of his couch and picked a small box up off the ground. He held it up, showing it to Blushweaver.

 “A box,” she said flatly. “What a convincing argument you make.”

 He pulled the top off of the box, leaving a small grey squirrel sitting in his hand. It stood perfectly still, staring forward, fur blowing in the breeze.

 “A Lifeless rodent,” Blushweaver said. “That’s much better. I feel myself being swayed already.”

 “The person who broke into Mercystar’s palace used this as a distraction,” Lightsong said. “Do you know anything about Breaking Lifeless, my dear?”

 She shrugged.

 “I didn’t either,” Lightsong said. “Not until I required my priests to break this one. Apparently, it can take weeks to take commmand of a Lifeless for which you do not have the right command words. I’m not even sure how the process goes--has something to with Breath and torture, apparently.”

 “Torture?” she said. “Lifeless can’t feel.”

 Lightsong shrugged. “Anyway, my servants broke this one for me. The stronger the Awakener who created the Lifeless, the more difficult it is to break the creature and take control of it without the right Commands.”

 “That’s why we need to get the Commands from Allmother,” Blushweaver said. “If something were to happen to her, her ten thousand would become useless to us. It would take years to break that many Lifeless!”

 “The God King has the codes as well,” Lightsong said.

 “Oh,” Blushweaver said, “and you think he is going to just give them over to us? Assuming we’re even allowed to talk to him?”

 “Just pointing out that a single assassination couldn’t ruin our entire army,” Lightsong said, holding up the squirrel. “However, that’s not the point. The point is that whomever made this squirrel held quite a bit of Breath, and knew what he was doing. The creature’s blood has been replaced with ichor-alcohol. The sutures were made very exactly. It’s a marvelous piece of art, for a living corpse.”

 “And?” she asked.

 “And, he released it in Mercystar’s palace,” Lightsong said. “Creating a distraction so that he could sneak down into those tunnels. Someone else followed the intruder in, and this second person killed a man to keep him from revealing what he’d seen. Whatever is in those tunnels--wherever they lead--it’s important enough to validate giving up an entire Breath. Important enough to kill for.”

 Blushweaver shook her head. “I still can’t believe you are even worrying about this.”

 “You said you knew about the tunnels,” Lightsong said. “I had Llarimar ask around, and others know of them too. They’re used for storage beneath the palaces, like you said. Different Gods have ordered them constructed at various times during the history of the Court.”

 “But,” he continued, feeling excited. “They would also be the perfect place to set up a clandestine operation! The Court is outside the jurisdiction of the regular city guards. Each palace is like a little, autonomous country! Expand a few of those cellars so that their tunnels connect with others, dig them out of the Court so that you can come and go secretly. . . .”

 “Lightsong,” Blushweaver said. “If something that secret were going on, then why would the priests all use those tunnels to come into the Court? Wouldn’t that be a little suspicious? I mean, if you noticed it, how hard could it be to discover?”

 Lightsong paused, then flushed slightly. “Of course,” he said. “I got so wrapped up in pretending to be meaningful that I forgot myself! Thank you so much for reminding me.”

 “Lightsong, I didn’t mean--”

 “No, it’s quite all right,” he said, standing suddenly. “You’re right. Why am I bothering? I need to remember who I am. Lightsong, self-hating God. The most useless person ever granted immortality. Just answer one question for me.”

 Blushweaver paused. “What question?”

 “Why?” he asked, looking at her. “Why do I hate being a God? Why do I act so frivolous? Why do I undermine my own authority, at the same time trying to undermine the entire culture I live in. Why?”

 “I. . .always assumed it was because you liked being pithy,” she said.

 “No,” he said. “Maybe that’s part of it, but the thing is, Blushweaver, I was like this from the first day. The very day I awoke, I refused to believe I was a God. Refused to accept my place in this pantheon and this Court. I’ve acted accordingly ever since. And, if I might say, I’ve gotten quite a bit more clever as the years have passed. But, that is beside the point. The thing I must focus on--the important point here--is why.”

 “I don’t know,” she confessed.

 “I don’t either,” he said. “But whomever I was before, he’s trying to get out, Blushweaver. That man I was before I died, he keeps whispering for me to dig at this mystery. Keeps warning me that I’m no God. Keeps prompting me to deal with this all in a frivolous way.”

 He shook his head. “I don’t know who I was--nobody will tell me. But, I’m beginning to have suspicions. I was a person who couldn’t simply sit and let something unexplained slide away into the fog of memory. I was a man who hated secrets. And I’m only just beginning to understand how many secrets there are in this Court.”

 Blushweaver looked taken aback.

 “Now,” he said, walking away from the pavilion, his servants hurrying to catch up, “if you will excuse me, I have some business to be about.”

 “What business?” Blushweaver demanded, rising.

 He glanced back. “I’ll tell you when I’m done.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Thirty-nine

 In the slums, it could seem like night, even during the full light of day.

 Vivenna continued to wander, stepping over soiled bits of colorful trash. She knew that she should probably find a place to hide and stay there. Yet, she wasn’t really thinking right any more.

 Peprin was dead. He’d been her friend since childhood. She’d convinced him to come with her on what now seemed the most idiotic of quests. It was her fault. He’d come. And now he was dead.

 Denth and his team had betrayed her. No. No, they had never worked for her. Now that she looked back, she could see the signs. How conveniently they’d found her in the restaurant. How they’d used her to try and get to Lemks’ Breath. How they’d manipulated her, letting her feel that she was in control--giving her the money, letting her go about her silly quest to help Idris. They’d just been playing along. Helping her so that they could keep an eye on her.

 She’d been a prisoner and never known it.

 The betrayal felt so much the worse for how she’d come to trust, even befriend, them. Yet, she could see warnings in the way that they’d acted. Tonk Fah’s joking brutality. The way Denth had made sure to explain that a mercenary had no allegiances. He’d pointed out that Jewels would work against her own Gods.

 Compared to that, what was betraying a friend?

 She stumbled down yet another alleyway, hand on the wall of a brick building beside her. Dirt and soot stained her fingers. Her hair was a bleached white. It still hadn’t recovered. Not after what she’d seen.

 The attack in the slum had been frightening. Getting captured by Vasher had been terrifying. But seeing Peprin, tied to that chair, blood coming from his nose, his cheeks sliced open to reveal the inside of his mouth. . . .

 She would never forget. Something inside of her seemed broken. Her ability to care. She was just. Numb.

 She reached the end of the alleyway, then paused, looking up dully. There was a wall front of her. A dead end. She turned to go back.

 “You,” a voice said.

 Vivenna spun, surprised at the speed her own reaction. Her mind remained numb, but a carnal part of her was still be awake. Capable of flight, of tension, of defensive instinct.

 She stood in another narrow alley, like those she had walked down all day. She’d stayed to the slums, figuring that Denth would expect her to run for the open city. He knew the place better than she did. In her addled mind, staying to the clustered, quiet streets of the slum seemed a much better idea.

 A man sat on a small stack of boxes in behind of her, legs swinging over the sides. He was short, dark haired, and wore typical slum clothing--a mixture of garments going through various stages of wear.

 “You’ve been causing quite a stir,” the man said, legs swinging.

 She stood quietly.

 “Woman wandering the slums in a beautiful white dress, eyes dark, hair white and ragged. If everyone hadn’t been so paranoid following the attack the other day, you’d have been seen to hours ago.”

 Seen to. The way he said it made her suspect that ‘seeing to’ didn’t mean helping.

 The man looked up at her. She seemed to faintly recognize him. “You’re Idrian,” she whispered.

 He shrugged.

 “You know who I am,” she said.

 “I don’t know anything,” he said. “Particularly not things that could get me into trouble.”

 “Please,” she said. “You have to help me.” She took a step forward.

 He hopped off his boxes, a knife flashing in his hand. “Help you?” he asked. “I saw that look in your eyes when you came to the meeting. You look down on us. Just like the Hallandren. No, you’re not one of us

 He shook his head. “A lot of people have seen you, wandering about like a wraith, but nobody seems to know exactly where to find you. It appears that you’re wanted. There’s quite a tumult in some parts of the slums.”

 Denth, she thought. It’s a miracle I’ve stayed free so long. I need to do something. Stop wandering. Find a place to hide.

 “I figure that someone will find you eventually,” the man said. “So, I’m going strike first.”

 “Please,” she whispered.

 He raised the knife. “I won’t turn you in. You deserve at least that much. Besides, I don’t want to draw attention to myself. That dress, though. That will sell for a lot, even a scraped up like it is. I could feed my family for weeks on that cloth.”

 She paused.

 “Scream and I’ll cut you,” he said quietly. “It’s not a threat. It’s just an inevitability. The dress, princess. You’ll be better without it, anyway. It’s what is making everyone pay attention to you.”
 She considered BioChroma. But. . .she hadn’t been able to make that work very well, yet. So, numb, she reached up, undoing the buttons.

 “Don’t drop it to the ground,” the man said. “It’s dirty enough already.”

 She pulled it off, then shivered, standing only in her under-leggings and her shift. He took the dress, then pened her pocket pouch. Frowned as he tossed aside the rope inside of it. “No money?”

 She shook her head dully.

 “The leggings. They’re silk, right?”

 Her shift came down to her mid thighs. She stooped down, pulling off the leggings, then handed them over.

 He took them, and she saw a glint of greed--or perhaps something else--in his eyes as he eyed the shift.

 “The shift,” he said, waving his knife.

 “No,” she said quietly.

 He took a step forward.

 Something snapped inside of her.

 “No!” she yelled. “No, no, NO! You take your city, your colors and clothing, and go! Leave me!” She fell to her knees, crying, and grabbed handfuls of refuse, rubbing it on the shift.

 “There!” she screamed. “You want it! Take it from me! Sell it looking like this!”

 Contrary to his threat, the man wavered. He looked around, then clutched the valuable cloth to his chest and dashed from the alleyway.

 Vivenna knelt, weeping. Where had she found more tears? She curled up, heedless of the trash and mud, and shivered.

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 It started raining sometime while she was curled in the mud. It was one of the soft, hazy Hallandren rainfalls. The wet drops kissed her cheek, little streams running down the sides of the alleyway walls.

 She was hungry and exhausted. But, with the falling rain, came a bit of lucidity.

 She needed to move. The thief had been right--the dress had been a hindrance. She felt naked in the sift, particularly now that it was growing wet, but she had seen women in the slums wearing just as little. She needed to go, become just another waif of a woman in the dirt and grime.

 She crawled over to a refuse pile, noticing a bit of a cloth sticking from it. She pulled free a muddy, stinking shawl. Or maybe it had been a rug. Either way, she wrapped it around her shoulders, pulling it tight across her chest to offer some measure of modesty. She tried to make her hair black, but for some reason it refused.

 She sat, too uncaring to be frustrated, uncertain why she wasn’t able to change the color. So, instead, she simply rubbed mud and dirt into it, changing the pale white into a sickly brown.

 It’s still too long, she thought. I’ll need to do something about that. It stands out. No beggar would keep hair that long--it would be difficult to care for.

 She began to make her way out of the alleyway, then paused. The shawl was too bright, now that she was wearing it.

 BioChroma. I’ll be immediately visible to anyone with the First Heightening. I can’t hide in the slums!

 She still felt the loss of the Breath she’d sent into the rope, and then the larger amount she’d wasted on Tonks’ cloak. Yet, she had the greater portion left. She huddled down by the side of the wall, nearly losing control again as she considered the situation.

 And then, she realized something.

 Tonk Fah. He snuck up on me down in that cellar. I couldn’t feel his Breath. Just like I couldn’t feel Vasher’s when he took me in my rooms. How did they hide it?

 The answer felt so easy it was ridiculous. She couldn’t feel the Breath in the rope she’d made. She picked it up, tying it around her ankle.

 She took the shawl, holding it in front of her. It was such a pathetic thing, frayed at the edges, only a bit of its original red color peeking through the grime.

 “My Breath to yours,” she said, speaking the words Denth had tried to get her to say. They were the same words Lemks had spoken when he’d given her his Breath.

 It worked on the shawl too. Her Breath drained from her body, all of it, getting invested into the shawl. It was no Command--the shawl wouldn’t be able to move or do anything--but her Breath, hopefully, would be safe. She wouldn’t give off a BioChromatic aura.

 None at all. She almost fell to the ground with the shock of losing it all. Where she had once been able to sense the entire city around her, now everything became still. It was as if it had all been silenced. The entire city becoming dead.

 Or, maybe it was Vivenna who had become dead. A Drab. She stood slowly, shivering in the drizzling rain, and wiped the water from her eyes. Then, she pulled the shawl--Breaths and all--close and shuffled out of the alleyway.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty

 Siri was sitting and having a meal on the Court green when Tridees found her. She ignored him for a time, content to pick at the dishes in front of her.

 The sea, she had decided, was quite strange. What else could be said of a place that could spawn creatures with such wiggly tentacles, creatures with such boneless bodies, and creatures with such needly skins? She poked at something the locals called a cucumber, but which--in actuality--tasted nothing like one.

 She’d tried them all, tasting each one with her eyes closed, focusing on the flavor. Some hadn’t been as bad as the others. She hadn’t really liked any of them, however.

 I would have trouble becoming a true Hallandren, she decided, sipping her fruit juice.

 Fortunately, the juice was delicious. Far better than anything she’d ever had in Idris. The variety, and flavor, of the numerous Hallandren fruits and other plants was almost as astounding as the oddness of its sea life.

 Tridees cleared his throat. The God King’s high priest was not a man who was accustomed to waiting.

 Siri nodded to her serving women, motioning for them to prepare another series of plates. Susebron had given Siri some coaching on how to eat with Hallandren royal etiquette, and she wanted to practice. Coincidentally, his way of eating--taking small bites, never really finishing anything--was a rather good one for testing out new dishes.

 She wanted to become familiar with Hallandren, its ways, its people, its tastes. She’d forced her servants to begin talking to her more, which was good. She was also trying the foods. She planned to meet with more of the Gods. In the distance, she saw Lightsong wandering by, and she waved to him fondly. He seemed uncharacteristically preoccupied, however, and he only gave a wave of his own, and didn’t come to visit her.

 Pity, she thought. I would have liked a good excuse to keep Tridees waiting even longer.

 The high priest cleared his throat again, this time more demandingly. Finally, Siri stood, waving for her servants to stay behind.

 “Would you mind walking with me for a bit, your grace?” she asked lightly. Then, she passed him, moving in a gorgeous violet dress with a gossamer train that trailed behind her in the grass.

 He hurried to catch up. “I need to speak to you about something,” he said insistently.

 “Yes,” she said. “I deduced that by the way that you summoned me several times today.”

 “You didn’t come,” he said. “You also turned away my messengers.”

 “It seems to me that the wife of the God King should not make a habit of responding to servants or hopping whenever she is requested.”

 Tridees frowned.

 “However,” she continued, “I will of course make time for the high priest himself, should he come to speak to me in person.”

 He eyed her, standing tall and straight-backed, wearing the God King’s colors of the day--blue and copper. “You should not antagonize me, your highness,” he finally said.

 Siri felt just a flush off anxiety, but caught her hair before it bleached white. “I am not antagonizing you,” she said. “I am simply establishing some things that should have been mine from the beginning.”

 Tridees got a hint of a smile on his face.

 What? Siri thought with surprise. Why that reaction?

 As they walked, he drew himself up more straightly, looking more confident. “I’m sure,” he said, his voice turning condescending. “You know very little of what you presume, your highness.”

 Blast! she thought. How did this conversation get away from me so quickly. I have to do something.

 “I might say the same to you, your grace,” she said as they rounded the side of the palace structure. The massive black temple loomed above them, sheer ebony blocks collected like the playthings of gigantic child.

 “Oh?” he said, glancing at her. “Somehow I doubt that.”

 She had to force back another spear of anxiety. Tridees smiled again.

 What? she thought. It’s like he can read my emotions. Like he can see. . . .

 But no, that was impossible. Her hair hadn’t changed colors, at least not discernibly. Still, color was a strange thing here. She glanced at him, trying to perceive a change around them. And, as she did, she noticed something interesting. In a pool around Tridees, the grass seemed just a shade more colorful.

 Breath, she thought. Of course he’d have some! He’s one of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

 People with enhanced BioChroma were supposed to be able to see very minute changes in color. Could he really be reading her from her hair? Was that why he had always been able to be so dismissive of her?

 He could see her fear.

 She gritted her teeth. In her youth, she’d ignored the exercises that Vivenna had done to make sure she had complete control over her hair. The practice had seemed silly to Siri. People who knew her would be able to read her emotions despite her hair, so what was the point in learning to keep it the same color?

 She hadn’t factored in a Court of the Gods and men with the power of BioChroma. Those tutors had been a whole lot more intelligent than Siri had given them credit.

 As were the priests. Now that she thought about it, it seemed obvious that Tridees and the others would have studied the meanings of all the shades of the royal locks. They’d been prepared for their new queen.

 She needed to get the conversation back on course. “Do not forget, Tridees,” she said. “You are the one who came to see me. Obviously, I have some measure of power here, if I could force even the high priest to come visit me.”

 He glanced at her, eyes harsh. Focusing, she kept her hair the deepest black. Black, for confidence. She met his eyes.

 Finally, he turned away. “I have heard disturbing rumors.”

 “Oh?” she said.

 “Yes. It appears that you are no longer fulfilling your wifely duties. Are you pregnant?”

 “No,” she said. “I had my women’s issue just a couple of days ago. You can ask my servants.”

 “Then why have you stopped?”

 “Did it really create such a stir?” she asked lightly. “What? Are your spies are annoyed to be missing their nightly show?”

 Tridees flushed just slightly. He glanced at her, and she again managed to keep her hair completely black. Not even a glimmer of white or red. He seemed more uncertain.

 “You Idrians,” the priest spat. “Living up in your lofty mountains, dirty and uncultured, but still assuming that you’re better than us. Don’t judge me. Don’t judge us. You know nothing.”

 “I know that you’ve been listening in on the God King’s chamber.”

 “Not just listening,” Tridees said. “The first few nights, there was a spy in the chambers itself.”

 Siri couldn’t mask this blush. Her hair remained mostly black, but if Tridees really did have enough BioChroma to distinguish subtle changes, he would have noticed a bit of red lightening it.

 “You are a foreign element,” Tridees said, turning away. “I am well aware of the poisonous teachings you people are trained in by your monks, the hatred you’re indoctrinated into believing. Do you really think that we’d let a woman from Idris confront the God King himself, alone, unwatched? We had to make certain you weren’t intending to kill him. We’re still not convinced.”

 “You speak with remarkable frankness,” she noted.

 “Just establishing some things that I should have established from the beginning,” he said. They stopped in the shadow of the massive palace. “You are not important here. Not compared to our God King. He is everything, and you are nothing. Just like the rest of us.”

 If he’s so important, Siri thought, meeting Tridees’ eyes, then why are you planning to kill him?

 She held his eyes. She wouldn’t have been able to do such a thing several months ago, when she’d first come to Hallandren. Even a few weeks ago, she would have looked away. But, when she considered it, she remembered Susebron. Tridees was the one who was orchestrating the plot to subdue, control, and eventually kill his own God King.

 And Siri wanted to know why.

 “I stopped having sex with the God King on purpose,” she said, keeping her hair dark with some effort. “I knew it would get your attention.”

 In truth, she had simply stopped her little performances each night. Tridees’ reaction, however, proved what Bluefingers had told her--she now knew for certain that the priests only listened, but did not watch. For that she could only bless her luck.

 They might still be unaware that she could communicate with Susebron, that she had taught him writing. She was extra careful to whisper when they spoke, and had even taken to writing things herself, to keep up the charade.

 “You must produce an heir,” Tridees said.

 “Or what?” Siri asked. “Why are you so eager, Tridees?”

 “It is none of your concern,” he said. “Suffice it to say that I have obligations that you cannot comprehend. I am subject to Gods, and I do their will, not yours.”

 “Well, you’re going to have to bend that last part a bit if you want your heir,” Siri said.

 Tridees obviously did not like how the conversation was going. He glanced at her hair, probably seeking a signal that she wasn’t as confident as she seemed. And yet, she kept her hair from showing even a slight lightening. Eventually, he glanced back at her eyes.

 “You can’t kill me Tridees,” she said. “Not if you want the royal line to mix in with the blood of your God Kings. You can’t bully me or force me. Only the God King could really do that. And, we know how he is.”

 “I don’t know what you mean,” Tridees said flatly.

 “Oh, come now,” Siri said. “You didn’t honestly expect me to sleep with the man and not find out he has no tongue? That he cannot speak? That he’s virtually a child? I doubt he can even go to the privy without help from some servants to explain what to do.”

 Tridees flushed with anger.

 He really does care, Siri thought with an abstract interest. Or, at least, insulting his God King insults him. He’s more devoted than I would have given him credit.

 So, it probably wasn’t about money. She couldn’t be sure, but she suspected that this was not the type of man to sell out his religion or execute his God because of bribes or outside influence. Whatever the reasonings for what was happening inside the palace, it probably had to do with true religious conviction.

 Revealing what she knew about Susebron was a gamble. She figured that Tridees would guess that anyway, and so it would be better to indicate that she thought Susebron a fool with the mind of a child. Give away one bit of information, but add a bit of deception to it to turn her opponents the wrong direction. If they assumed that she thought Susebron a fool, they wouldn’t suspect an alliance between her and her husband.

 Truth be told, Siri wasn’t sure if she was doing the right thing. She had no experience with politics--only half-remembered lessons and vague advice. And yet, her father had often said that the quickest way to teach a man to swim was to push him into a lake. It wasn’t the best way, perhaps, but the quickest.

 She needed to learn, or Susebron would die. And the only way to learn was to do. She didn’t have much, but she did have something that the priests wanted. Her womb.

 It seemed that she could hold it for ransom effectively, for Tridees pushed down his anger, and maintained a semblance of calmness. He glanced up at the palace, turning from her. “Do you know much about the history of this kingdom?” he asked. “After your family departed, of course.”

 Siri frowned, surprised at the question. More than you probably think, she thought to herself. “Not really,” she said out loud.

 “Lord Peacegiver left us with a challenge,” Tridees said. “He gave us the treasure our God King now holds, a wealth of BioChromatic Breath like nobody had ever seen. He told us to keep it safe.”

 He turned back to her. “And he warned us not to use it.”

 Siri felt a slight shiver.

 “I do not expect you to understand what we have done,” Tridees said, looking back up toward the top of the palace temple. “But, it is necessary.”

 “Necessary to keep a man in bondage?” Siri said. “To remove his ability to speak, to make a continual child out of a grown man? He didn’t even understand what he was supposed to do with a woman!”

 “It was necessary,” Tridees said, jaw set. “You Idrians. Just because it’s different from what you do, you look down on it. You don’t even try to understand. I’ve had dealings with your father for years, and I sense the same ignorant prejudice in him.”

 He’s baiting me, Siri thought, keeping her emotions in check. It was harder than she’d have thought. Focus. “Believing in Austre instead of your living Gods is not ignorance. After all, you’re the ones who abandoned your faith and looked toward an easier path.”

 Tridees shrugged. “We follow the God who came to protect us when your Austre--an unseen, unknown thing--abandoned us to war and to the destroyer Klad. Peacegiver. Do you know that there was another name for him, once? Warbreaker. A Returned who came back to life with a specific purpose--to stop the conflict between men, to bring peace again to Hallandren.”

 He glanced at her. “His name is holy. He is the one who gave us life, princess. And he really only asked one thing of us. To care for the power he gave up when he died. He gave it to us, to be held by the God King, should our God of Gods Return again and demand it. We couldn’t let it be used. We couldn’t let it be profaned. Not even by our God King.”

 He fell silent.

 So how do you get that treasure away from him? She thought. She was tempted to ask it, but she hesitated. Would that be giving away too much? She knew that he wouldn’t answer her, so asking seemed frivolous.

 Finally, Tridees spoke. “I see now why your father sent you instead of the other one. We should have focused more on all of the daughters, not just the first.”

 The statement surprised her, but she kept her hair in check.

 Tridees sighed, looking away. “What are your demands? What will it take to make you return to your. . .work each night?”

 “My servants,” she said. “I want to replace my main serving women with the women from Pahn Kahl.”

 “You are displeased with your serving women?”

 “Not in particular,” Siri said. “I simply feel that I have more in common with the women of Pahn Kahl. They, like me, are4 living in Hallandren, exiled from their own people. Plus, I like the browns they wear.”

 “Of course,” Tridees said, obviously inferring more ‘Hallandren prejudice’ from her request. “It shall be done.”

 “The Hallandren girls can continue to serve in the place that the Pahn Kahl women did,” Siri said. “They don’t have to leave me completely--in fact, I still want to talk to some of them about the city and its culture. However, the main women who are with me always, they are to be from Pahn Kahl.”

 “As I said,” Tridees said. “It shall be done. You’ll return to your efforts, then?”

 “For now,” Siri said. “That will earn you a few more weeks, at least.”

 Tridees flushed in anger, but what could he really do? Siri smiled at him, then turned and trailed away, making her way back to her pavilion. However, she found herself a little dissatisfied with the way the conversation had gone. She’d achieved a victory--but at the cost of antagonizing Tridees even further.

 I doubt he would have taking a liking to me, no matter how hard I tried, she decided, sitting down. This is probably the better way.

 She still didn’t know what was going to happen to Susebron, but she knew she could manipulate the priests at least a little bit. That meant something.

 Still, she knew she was playing at something very dangerous. She was a novice to politics, and Susebron a novice to almost everything. The truth was, escaping the city to Idris was looking more and more appealing to her.

 She turned back to her meal, ready to try another round of sea food. She did her best to learn about Hallandren--partially because she had so much free time--but if it came down to Susebron’s life, she was going to get him out. Hopefully, giving Bluefingers’ Pahn Kahl a more prominent position around her would facilitate that escape. Hopefully.

 With a sigh, she raised the first bit of food to her lips and continued with her tasting.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-one

 A week living in the gutters served to drastically change Vivenna’s perspective on life.

 She sold her hair on the second day, getting a depressingly small amount for it. The food that she’d bought that day hadn’t served to fill her stomach--it had only only re-awakened her to what she’d been missing.

 She didn’t have the strength to regrow the locks. The haircut didn’t even have the dignity of being shaved--it was a ragged job of hackwork, and would have still been a pale white, save for the fact that it was matted and blackened with dirt and soot.

 She sat on the side of the street, holding out her hand to the passing crowds, keeping her eyes down, hoping for any kind of handout. No offerings came. She wasn’t certain how the other beggars did it; their meager earnings seemed an amazing treasure to her. They knew so much she didn’t--where to sit, how to plead. Passers learned to avoid beggars, even with their eyes. The successful beggars, then, were those who managed to draw attention to themselves.

 Vivenna wasn’t certain if she wanted the attention or not. The gnawing pain of hunger had eventually driven her out of the slums and onto busy streets. She was still frightened that Denth or Vasher might find her, but the more hungry she grew, the less other worries seemed to bother her.

 Eating was a problem for now. Being killed by Denth or Vasher was a problem for later.

 The flood of people in their colors continued to pass. Vivenna watched them, seeing the flashes of color after color, without focusing on faces or bodies. Just colors. Like a spinning wheel, each spoke a different hue.

 Denth won’t find me here, she thought. He wont. He won’t see the me in the pitiful beggar on the side of the street.

 Her stomach growled. She’d learned to ignore it. Just like the people ignored her.

 She still hardly believed what Denth and the others had done. She had such fond memories of their joking. She couldn’t connect that to what she’d seen in the cellar. In fact, sometimes, she found herself rising as if to seek them out. Surely the things she’d seen had been hallucinations. Surely they couldn’t be such terrible men.

 She sat back down.

 That’s foolish, she thought. I need to focus. Why isn’t my mind working right any more?

 Focus on what? Begging? That didn’t take much work. There wasn’t much to think about. She couldn’t go to Denth, that was certain. She’d sent away the soldiers outside the city, so that was no refuge. The city authorities would be no help--now that she was living on the streets, even she had heard the rumors of the Idris princess who had been causing such troubles. She’d be arrested in a heartbeat.

 There were soup kitchens in the city, but the first one she’d gone to, she’d spotted Tonk Fah lounging in a doorway across the street, watching the people in line. She’d turned and scurried away, hoping he hadn’t seen her. For the same reason, she didn’t dare leave the city. Denth was sure to have agents watching the city gates. Besides, where would she go? She only vaguely knew the way back to Idris, and she had no coin for food along the way.

 Perhaps she could leave if she managed to save up enough money begging. But, that was hard. Every time she got a coin, she spent it on food. She couldn’t help herself. Nothing else seemed to matter.

 She’d already lost weight. Her stomach growled.

 So, she sat begging, sweaty and dirty in the meager shade of an alleyway. She still wore only her shift and the shawl, though she was dirty enough that it was difficult to tell where clothing ended and skin began. Her arrogance of days past, refusing to wear anything but the rich dresses, now seemed ridiculous to her. She’d worn clothing woth enough to have fed her for weeks. What had she been thinking?

 She shook her head. She’d only been on the streets for a week. Her life seemed bad to her--the week felt like an eternity--yet she knew that she’d only just begun to experience the life of the poor. How did they survive? Sleeping in alleyways? Getting rained on every day? Jumping at every sound? Feeling so hungry they were tempted to pick at and eat the rotting garbage they found in gutters. She’d tried that. She’d even managed to keep some down.

 That was the only thing she’d had to eat in two days.

 Someone paused beside her. She looked up, eager, hand stretching further until she saw which colors were represented. Yellow and Blue. City guard. Once she made the connection, she instantly grabbed at her shawl, pulling it closer. It was foolish, she knew--nobody knew about the Breaths it contained. Yet, the move was reflexive. The shawl was the only thing she owned, and--meager though it was--several urchins had already tried stealing it from her while she slept.

 The guard didn’t reach for her shawl, however. He just nudged her with his truncheon. “Hey,” he said. “Move. No begging on this corner.”

 He didn’t offer an explanation. They never did. There were apparently rules about where beggars could sit and where they couldn’t, but nobody took thought to explain such things to the actual beggars. Laws were things of lords and Gods, not the lowly.

 I’m already thinking about lords as if they were some other group.

 Vivenna rose, head bowed, and felt a moment of nausea and dizziness. She rested against the side of the building, and the guard nudged her again, prompting her to shuffle away.

 Lords and gods. Could a person really forget in such a short time that she was a princess? Yet, with the hunger, the fatigue, the dirt, and the bruises, she wasn’t really all that surprised to sense the changes inside of her.

 She bowed her head and moved along with the crowd, though most of them kept their distance from her. Ironic that, now that she didn’t care about the crowds, they would leave her space. She didn’t want to think about how she probably smelled--though more than the scent, it was the fear of being robbed that probably kept the others away. They needn’t have worried. She wasn’t skilled enough to cut purses or pick pockets, and she couldn’t afford to get caught, for that would lead to her being arrested.

 She’d stopped worrying about the morality of stealing days ago. Such a quick change. Before, she hadn’t been so naive to assume that she wouldn’t steel if she were denined food--but she’d assumed that it would take her at least a few months to reach that state.

 She didn’t head to another corner, but instead shuffled out of the crowds, making her way back into the highlands--the Idrian slums. Here, she’d gained some small measure of acceptance. In other slums, she’d been threatened with beatings or worse. At least here, she was considered one of them. None knew that she was the princess--after that first man, nobody had recognized her. However, her accent and her ability to speak of the highlands had earned her a place.

 She began to search out a location to spend the night. That was one of the reasons she’d decided not to continue begging for the evening. It was a profitable time, true, but she was just so tired. She wanted a good place to sleep tonight. She wouldn’t have thought that it would make much difference which alleyway one huddled in, but it did. Some were warmer than others, and some had better cover from the rain. Some were in safer sections. She was beginning to learn these things, as well as who to avoid making people mad.

 In her case, that last group included pretty much everyone--including the urchins. They were all above her in the pecking order. She’d learned that second first day. She’d tried to bring back a coin from selling her hair, intending to save it for a chance at leaving the city. She wasn’t certain how the urchins had known that she’d saved a coin, but she’d gotten her first beating that day. She didn’t intend to get another.

 She crept along, careful to keep her head bowed, her back cowed, lest someone take offense at her. She paused as she walked, however, passing a street to her right. It was where the whores waited.

 Vivenna stared at them, standing in their revealing clothing. It was only two streets into the slum, a place that wasn’t too threatening for outsiders. Everyone knew not to rob a man on his way to visit the whores. The slum lords didn’t like it when their customers got scared away. Bad for business, as Denth might say.

 Vivenna stood for a long moment. The whores looked fed. They weren’t dirty, not compared to Vivenna. Several of them laughed together.

 She took a step forward.

 She could join them. An urchin had spoken of it the other day, mentioned that she was still young. He’d wanted her to come to the slum lord with him, hoping to get some coin for recruiting a willing girl.

 It was so tempting. Food. Warmth. A dry bed.

 Blessed Austre, she thought, shaking herself out of the trance. What am I thinking? What have I become?

 She forced herself to keep moving, stumbling away from the women and the security they offered. She wouldn’t do that. Not yet.

 Not yet.

 Oh, Lord of Colors, she thought with horror, seeing the changes within herself. I need to get out of this city. Better for me to die, starving on the road back to Idris--better to get taken by Denth and tortured--than to end up there, in the brothel.

 However, like the morality of stealing, the morality of using her body seemed much more vague, now, when her hunger was such an omnipresent need.

 She made her way to her favorite alleyway. It was secluded, yet often filled with younger urchins. Their company made her feel better, though she knew they searched her clothing at night for coins.

 I can’t believe how tired I am. . . . she thought, feeling dizzy again, putting her hand against the wall. She took a few deep breaths.

 Finally, she started forward again. She had been right to come early. The alleyway was empty, everyone else staying out in the evening to try getting a few extra coins. She took the best of the spots--an earthen mound which had managed to grow a small tuft of grass. It was the softest location she’d found to sleep. There weren’t even that many rocks in the dirt.

 Shadows darkened the alleyway behind her.

 Her reaction was immediate. She started to run, before she even thought to look backward. Living on the streets taught one quickly. However, another shadow stepped across the other end of the alley in front of her. She froze, then finally spun, looking to see a group of street thugs moving down the alleyway behind her.

 At their back was the man who had robbed her a week ago. He looked chagrined. “Sorry, princess,” he said. “Bounty just got too high. Took me blasted long enough to find you, though. You did a great job of hiding.”

 Vivenna blinked. And then, she simply let herself slide down to the ground.

 I just can’t take any more, she thought, wrapping her arms around herself, weeping quietly. She was exhausted. Mentally, emotionally, completely. In a way, she was glad it was over. She didn’t even know what the men would do to her, but she did know it was over. Whomever they sold her to wouldn’t be foolish enough to let her escape them again.

 She waited on the soft earth, dizzy. The thugs clustered around her. She heard one mention Denth.

 Rough hands grabbed her arm, towing her to her feet. She followed with head bowed. They led her out onto the main street. It was growing dim, but no urchins or beggars made their way toward the alley.

 I should have realized, she thought. It was too deserted.

 She walked numbly. Everything, finally, was overwhelming her. She couldn’t summon the energy to care about escaping, not again. She’d done that too much already. Abstractly, she realized that her tutors had--indeed--been right. Escaping quickly was the only way. When you were weak and hungry, it was hard to summon the energy to care about anything, even living.

 Obviously those tutors hadn’t expected her to get kidnapped three times.

 The thugs paused. Vivenna frowned, looking up, blinking away her dizziness. There was something in the dark street in front of them.

 A black sword in a silver sheath stuck from the ground. The weapon, sheath and all, had somehow been rammed down into the earth.

 The street grew still. Then, one of the thugs stepped forward, putting his hand on the hilt, undoing the sheath clasp. Vivenna felt a sudden nausea, more of a memory than a real emotion, but it was enough. She stumbled back, horrified.

 The other thugs, transfixed, stepped up around their friend. One of them reached for the hilt.

 The man carrying the sword struck. He swung the weapon, sheath and all, into the face of his friend. A black smoke began to twist out of the sheath, rising from the tiny bit of the blade that was visible.

 Men cried out, each one scrambling for the sword. The man holding it continued to swing, the weapon hitting with far more force and damage than a sheathed sword should have. Bones broke, blood began to run on the cobblestones, and the man continued to swing, moving with a terrible speed.

 Vivenna, still stumbling backward, could see his eyes. They were terrified.

 He killed his last friend by slamming the sheathed sword down against the man’s back. Bones cracked. By now, the clothing on the first man’s arm had disintegrated, and a blackness--like vines growing on a wall--had twisted up around his shoulder. Black, pulsing veins that bulged out of the skin. The man screamed a piercing, desperate cry.

 Then, he twisted the sword around and rammed it, sheath and all, through his stomach. It cut skin and flesh, though the sheath itself didn’t seem sharpened. The man stumbled to his knees, then slumped backward, twitching, face staring up into the air as the black veins on his arm began to evaporate into dark smoke. He died like that, somehow maintain the kneeling posture, sword sticking down through his chest and propping him up from behind.

 Vivenna stood alone on a street littered with corpses. A figure dropped from a rooftop, lowered by two twisting lengths of animated rope. He landed softly, then walked forward, ropes falling dead. He passed Vivenna, ignoring her, and grabbed the sword by the hilt. He paused for a moment, then did the clasp up and pulled the weapon free from the corpse’s chest.

 The dead man finally fell to the ground.

 Vivenna stared dully ahead. Then, numb, she sat down in the street. She didn’t even twitch as Vasher picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-two

 “Her Excellency is not interested in seeing you,” the priestess said, maintaining a reverent posture.

 “Well, I’m not interested in her disintest,” Lightsong said. “Perhaps you should ask her again, just to be sure.”

 The priestess bowed her head. “My pardons, your Excellency,” the woman said. “But I have already asked fourteen times for you. Goddess Allmother is growing impatient with your requests, and she asked me not to respond to them any more.”

 “Did she give the same command to any of the other priestesses?”

 The priestess paused. “Well, no, your Excellency.”

 “Wonderful,” Lightsong said. “Send for one of them. Then, send her to ask Allmother if she will see me.”

 The priestess sighed visibly--an action that Lightsong considered something of a victory. Allmother’s priests were among the most pious--and most humble--in the Court. If he could annoy them, he could annoy anyone.

 He waited, hands on hips as the priestess went to do his bidding. That was one of the main problems with trying to blockade another God. Allmother could give them orders and commands, but she couldn’t really tell them to ignore Lightsong. After all, he was a God too. So, as long as he asked them to do things other than what Allmother had explicitly told them not to do, they had to obey.

 Even if it annoyed their Goddess.

 “I’m developing a new skill,” Lightsong said. “Irritation by proxy!”

 Llarimar sighed. “What about your speech to Goddess Blushweaver a few days ago, your Excellency? It seemed to imply that you were going to try to not annoy people as much.”

 “I said nothing of the sort,” Lightsong said. “I simply said that I was coming to recognize within myself a little more of the person I used to be. That doesn’t mean I’m going to discard all the progress I’ve made over the last few years.”

 “Your sense of self-awareness is remarkable, your grace,” Llarimar said flatly.

 “I know! Now, hush. The priestess is coming back.”

 Indeed, the woman approached and bowed herself before Lightsong on the grass. “My apologies, your Excellency. Our Goddess, however, has now requested that no priestess be allowed to ask her if she will meet with you.”

 “Did she tell them that they couldn’t ask if she would come out here?”

 “Yes, your Excellency,” the priestess said. “And every other iteration of phrasing that would imply asking her to come within your excellency’s proximity, or communicate with him by letter, or relay messages from him in any form.”

 “Hum,” he said, tapping his chin. “She’s getting better. Well, I guess there’s nothing to be done about it.”

 The priestess relaxed visibly.

 “Scoot, set up my pavilion here in front of her palace,” Lightsong said. “I’m going to be sleeping here tonight.”

 The priestess looked up.

 “You’re going to do what?” Llarimar asked.

 Lightsong shrugged. “I’m not moving until I meet with her. So, that means staying until she acknowledges me. It’s been nearly a week! Well, if she wants to be stubborn, then I’ll prove that I can be equally stubborn.” He eyed the priestess. “I’m quite practiced at it, you know. Being an insufferable buffoon, and all. I don’t suppose she forbid you from letting squirrels into the building?”

 “Squirrels, your grace?” the woman asked.

 “Excellent,” Lightsong said, sitting down as his servants erected the pavilion. He pulled the Lifeless squirrel from its box and held it forward.

 “Almond grass,” he said quietly, giving the new Command he’d had his people imprint on the Lifeless. Then he spoke louder, so that the priestess could hear. “Go into the building, search out the Returned who lives in it, and run around in circles squeaking as loudly as you can. Don’t let anyone catch you. Oh, and destroy as much furniture as you can. Almond grass.”

 The squirrel immediately jumped off his hand and shot toward the palace. The priestess spun, looking horrified. She squirrel began to screech with a sound that seemed rather un-squirrel like. It disappeared into the building, slipping between the legs of a startled guard.

 “What a delightful afternoon it’s becoming,” Lightsong said, reaching for a handful of grapes as the priestess rushed after the squirrel.

 “It won’t be able to follow all of those orders, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It still has the mind of a squirrel, despite the power that BioChroma gives it to obey commands.”

 Lightsong shrugged. “We shall see.”

 He began to hear screams of annoyance from inside the palace. He smiled.

 It took longer than he had expected. Allmother was a stubborn one, as proved by Blushweaver’s complete inability to manipulate her. As he sat--idly listening to a group of musicians he had ordered in--a priestess occasionally checked on him. Several hours passed, and Lightsong made no move to retreat. He didn’t eat or drink very much, so he didn’t need to visit the privy. He could simply sit, and wait.

 And be bothersome. He ordered his musicians to play louder. He had picked a group with a lot of percussion.

 Finally, a frazzled-looking priestess left the palace. “Her Excellency will see you,” the woman said, bowing before Lightsong.

 “Hum?” Lightsong said. “Oh, that. Do I have to go now? Can I finish listening to this song?”

 The priestess glanced up. “I--”

 “Oh, very well then,” Lightsong said, rising. “Let’s do it.”

 #

 Allmother was still in her audience chamber. Lightsong paused in the doorway--which, like those in every palace, was cut to the size of a God, and not a mortal. He frowned to himself.

 People still waited in a line, and Allmother sat in a throne at the front of the room. She was stocky for a goddess, and he had always thought that her white hair and wrinkled face stood out among the pantheon. By age of body, she was the oldest of the Gods.

 It had been a while since he’d come to visit her. In fact. . . .

 The last time I was here was before Calmseer gave up her Breath, he realized. That evening, years ago, when we shared what would be her last meal.

 He’d never come back. What would have been the point? They’d only gotten together in the first place because of Calmseer. And, during most of the meetings, Allmother had been quite vocal about what she thought of Lightsong. That hadn’t ever really bothered him. At least she was honest.

 That was more than he could say for himself.

 She didn’t acknowledge him as he entered. She continued to sit, a little stooped over, listening to the man petitioning before her. He was middle aged, and stood awkwardly, leaning on a walking staff.

 “. . .children are starving now,” he said. “I cannot afford the food any more. I figured if my leg worked, I could go back to the docks and make a living again.” He looked down.

 “Your faith is commendable,” Allmother said. “Tell me, how did you lose the use of your leg?”

 “A fishing accident, your Excellency,” the man said. “I came down from the highlands a few years back, when late frosts took my crops. I took a job on one of the stormrunners--the ships who go out during the spring tempests, catching fish when others remain safe in the harbor. The accident crushed a barrel against my leg. Nobody will take me on to work the boats anymore, not with a lame leg.”

 Allmother nodded.

 “I wouldn’t have come to you,” he said. “But with my wife sick and my daughter crying with such hunger. . . .”

 Allmother reached a hand out, laying it on the man’s shoulder. “I understand your difficulties, but your problems are not as severe as you may think. Go and speak with my high priest. I have a man on the docks who owes me allegiance, and we will put you in touch with him. You have two good hands; you will be put to work sewing nets or learning carpentry.”

 The man looked up, hope glimmering in his eyes.

 “We will send you with enough food to care for your family in mean time,” Allmother said. “Go with my blessing.”

 The man rose, then fell back to his knees and began to cry. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

 Priests walked forward and led the man away. The room fell still, and Allmother finally looked over, meeting Lightsong’s eyes. She nodded to the side, where a priest stepped up, holding a bundle of fur tied tightly with ropes.

 “This is yours, I am told?” Allmother asked.

 “Ah, yes,” Lightsong said, flushing slightly. “Terribly sorry about that. It kind of got away from me.”

 “With an accidental Command to find me?” Allmother asked. “Then run around in circles screaming?”

 “That actually worked?” Lightsong said. “Interesting. My high priest didn’t think the squirrel brain would be capable of following such complicated orders.”

 Allmother regarded him with a flat look.

 “Oh,” Lightsong said. “I mean, ‘Whoops. It completely misunderstood me. Stupid squirrel.’ My deepest apologize, honored sister.”

 Allmother sighed. Then she waved toward a doorway on the side of the room. Lightsong walked over to it, and she followed, a few servants trailing. Allmother moved with a stiff agedness.

 How odd, Lightsong thought. Is it me, or does she look older than she did before? That would, of course, have been impossible. Returned did not age. At least, not the ones who had reached maturity.

 Once they were out of earshot, Allmother grabbed his arm. “What in the name of the Colors do you think you are doing?” she snapped.

 Lightsong turned, raising an eyebrow. “Well, you wouldn’t see me, and­--”

 “Do you intend to destroy what little authority we have left, you idiot?” Allmother asked. “Already, people in the city are saying that the Returned are growing weak, that the best of us died years ago.”

 “Maybe they’re right.”

 Allmother scowled. “If too many of them believe that, then we lose our access to Breaths, Lightsong. If that happens, we die. Have you considered that? Have you considered what your lack of decorum, your flippancy, could cost all of us?”

 “Is that the reason for the show then?” he asked, glancing back through the doorway.

 “Once, the Returned didn’t just listen to petitions and say yes or no,” Allmother said. “They would take the time to hear each person who came to them, then seek to help them as best they could.”

 “Seems like an awful lot of trouble.”

 “We’re their gods. Should a bit of trouble deter us?” She paused, eying him. “Oh, of course. We wouldn’t want to let something as simple as the pains of our people interfere with our leisure time. Why am I even talking to you?” She turned to wander out of the room.

 “I came to give you my Lifeless Commands,” Lightsong said.

 Allmother paused. Then turned and glanced back at him.

 “Blushweaver has control of two sets of Commands,” Lightsong said. “That essentially gives her control of half of our Lifeless armies. That worries me for a reason I can’t even quite explain. I mean, I trust her as much as I trust any other Returned. However, if war does come, then she’ll quickly become the second most powerful person in the kingdom. Only the God King would have more authority.”

 Allmother regarded him with an unreadable expression.

 “I figure that the best way to counter her is to have someone else who has two sets of Commands,” Lightsong said. “If someone else has as many soldiers as she does, perhaps it will give her pause. Keep her from doing anything too rash.”

 There was silence in the room.

 “Calmseer trusted you,” Allmother finally said.

 “Her one flaw, I must profess,” Lightsong said. “Even Goddesses have them, or so I’m told. I’ve found it wise to never point such things out.”

 “She was the best of us,” Allmother said, glancing out in the direction of her supplicants. “She would meet with people all day, offering them comfort. The people loved her.”

 “Bottom line blue,” Lightsong said. “That’s my ultimate Command. Please, take it. I’ll tell Blushweaver that you bullied me into giving it to you. She’ll be angry at me, of course, but it won’t be the first time.”

 “No,” Allmother finally said. “No, I’m not letting you out of this so easily, Lightsong.”

 “What?” he asked, startled.

 “Can’t you feel it?” she asked. “Something is happening in the Court, and in the city. This mess with the Idrians and their slums, the increasingly violent arguments among our priests.” She shook her head. “I’m not letting you wiggle out of your part. You were chosen for that place of yours. You’re a God, like the rest of us, even if you try your best to pretend otherwise.”

 “You already have my Command, Allmother,” he said with a shrug, walking toward a doorway to leave. “Do what you will with it.”

 “Verdant bells,” Allmother said behind him. “That’s mine.”

 Lightsong closed his eyes.

 “Now two of us know both of them,” Allmother said. “If what you said earlier was true, then it’s better that our Commands be distributed.”

 He spun. “You were just calling me a fool! Now you entrust me with command of your soldiers? I must ask, Allmother, and please think me not rude. But what in the name of the Colors is wrong with you?”

 “I dreamed that you would come today,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I saw it in the pictures. I remembered noise when I awoke, and I saw Lifeless eyes watching me. I saw patterns of circles in the paintings, and they were all red and gold. Your colors.”

 “Coincidence,” he said.

 She snorted quietly. “Someday, you’ll have to get over your foolish selfishness, Lightsong. This isn’t just about us. I’ve decided to start doing a better job of things. Perhaps you should take a look at who you are and what you are doing, then make a few changes.”

 “Ah, my dear Allmother,” Lightsong said. “You see, the problem in that challenge is the presumption that I haven’t tried to be something other than what I am. Let me assure you that I have, and that every time I do, disaster is the result.”

 “Well, you now have my Commands. For better, or for worse.” The aged Goddess turned away, walking back toward her room of supplicants. “I, for one, am curious to see how you handle them.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-three

 Vivenna awoke, sick, tired, thirsty, starving.

 But alive.

 She opened her eyes, feeling a strange sensation. Comfort. She was in a comfortable plush bed. She sat up immediately, and her head spun.

 “I’d be careful,” a voice said. “Your body is weak.”

 She blinked fuzzy eyes, focusing on a figure sitting at a table a short distance away, his back to her. He appeared to be eating.

 A black sword in a silver sheath rested against the table.

 “You,” she whispered.

 “Me,” he said between bites.

 She looked down at herself. She wasn’t wearing her shift any more, but instead a set of soft cotton sleeping garments. Her body was clean. She raised a hand to her hair, feeling that the tangles and mats were gone. It was still white.

 She felt so strange to be clean.

 “Did you rape me?” she said quietly.

 He snorted. “I don’t like women that Denth’s had.”

 “I never slept with him,” she said, though she didn’t know why she cared to tell him.

 Vasher turned, face still wearing the patchy, unkempt beard. His clothing was far less fine than her own. He studied her eyes. “He had you fooled, didn’t he?”

 She nodded.

 “Idiot.”

 She nodded again.

 He snorted to himself, then turned back to his meal. “The woman who runs this building,” he said between bites. “I paid her to bathe you, dress you, and change your bedpan. I never touched you.”

 She frowned. “What. . .happened?”

 “Do you remember the fight on the street?”

 “With your sword?”

 He nodded.

 “Vaguely. You saved me.”

 “I kept a tool out of Denth’s hands,” he said. “That’s all that really matters.”

 “Thank you anyway.”

 He was silent for a few moments. “You’re welcome,” he finally said.

 “Why do I feel so. . .sick?”

 “Tramaria,” the man said. “It’s a sickness, one you don’t have in the highlands. Insect bites spread it. You probably got it sometime about a week before I found you.”

 She put a hand to her head.

 “You probably had a pretty bad week,” Vasher noted. “What with the dizziness, the dimentia, and the hunger.”

 “Yes,” she said.

 “You deserved it.” He continued to eat.

 She didn’t move for a long moment. His food smelled so good, but she’d apparently been fed on broth while she slept, for she wasn’t as famished as she might have thought. Just mildly hungry.

 “How long was I unconcious?” she asked.

 “A week,” he said. “You should probably sleep some more.”

 “What are you going to do with me?”

 He didn’t reply. “The BioChromatic Breaths you had,” he said. “You gave them to Denth?”

 She paused, thinking. “Yes.”

 He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow.

 “No,” she finally admitted, looking away. “I put them in the shawl I was wearing.”

 He glanced at her, then stood, leaving the room. She considered running. Instead, she moved over and began to eat at his food--a fish, whole and fried. She didn’t even turn her nose down at the seafood. She just ate.

 He returned, then stopped in the doorway, watching her ravage the fish bones. However, he didn’t force her out of the seat. He simply took the other chair at the table. Finally, he held up the shawl, washed and clean.

 “This?” he asked.

 She froze, then nodded, a bit of fish on her cheek.

 He set the shawl on the table beside her.

 “You’re giving it back to me?” she asked.

 He shrugged. “If there really is Breath stored in it, I can’t get to it. Only you can.”

 She picked it up. “I don’t know the Command.”

 He raised an eyebrow. “You escaped those ropes of mine without Awakening them?”

 She shook her head. “I guessed that command.”

 “I knew I should have gagged you better. What do you mean you ‘guessed’ it?”

 “It was the first time I’d ever used Breath.”

 “That’s right, you’re of the Royal line.”

 “What does that mean?”

 He just shook his head, pointing toward the shawl. “Your Breath to mine,” he said. “That’s the Command you want.”

 She laid her hand on the shawl and said the words. Immediately, everything changed.

 Her dizziness went away. Her deadness to the world vanished. She gasped, shivering, shaking with the pleasure of Breath restored. It was so strong that she actually fell from the chair, gasping and quivering in wonder like a person having a fit. Yet, it was wonderful. Sensation came to her again. She could sense life. Could sense Vasher, making a pocket of color around him that was bright and beautiful. She was alive again.

 She basked in that for a long moment.

 “It’s shocking, when you first get it after a long time without,” Vasher said. “It’s usually not too bad if you take the Breath back after only an hour or so. Wait a week, though, and it’s like taking it in for the first time.”

 Smiling, feeling amazing, she climbed back into the seat and wiped the fish from her face. “My sickness is gone!”

 “Of course,” he said. “You’ve got enough Breath for at least the Third Heightening, if I’m reading you right. You’ll never know sickness. You’ll barely even age. Assuming you manage to hang onto the Breath, of course.”

 She looked up at him in a panic.

 “No,” he said. “I’m not going to force you to give it to me. Though I probably should. You’re far more trouble than you’re worth, princess.”

 She turned back to the food, feeling more confident. It seemed as if the last week had been a nightmare. A bubble, surreal, disconnected. Had it really been her who had sat on the street, begging? Had she really slept in the rain, lived in the mud? Had she really considered turning to prostitution?

 She had. She couldn’t forget, just because she now had Breath again. And, truthfully, she couldn’t help blaming a little bit of her attitude upon her becoming a Drab. Perhaps the sickness had a part in it too. However, the greatest part had been simple desperation.

 “All right,” he said, standing, picking up the black sword. “Time to go.”

 “Go where?” she asked.

 He ignored her, tossing a pile of clothing onto the table. “Put this on.”

 She picked through it. Thick trousers, a tunic that tucked into them, a vest to go over the tunic. All of various shades of blue. There were undergarments of a less bright color.

 “That’s a man’s clothing,” she said.

 “It’s utilitarian,” Vasher said, walking toward the doorway. “I’m not going to waste money buying you rich dresses, princess. You’ll just have to get used to those.”

 She opened her mouth, but then shut it, discarding her complaint. She’d just spent a week running around in a thin, nearly-translucent shift that had only covered her to mid thigh--assuming a breeze didn’t blow it up. She took the trousers and shirts thankfully.

 “Please,” she said, turning toward him. “I appreciate this clothing. But can I at least know where you intend to take me?”

 Vasher hesitated in the doorway. “I have work for you to do.”

 She shivered, thinking of the bodies Denth had shown her, and of the men that had tried to take her away. The men Vasher had killed. “You’re going to kill again, aren’t you?”

 He turned back toward her, frowning. “Denth is working toward something. I’m going to block him.”

 “Denth was working for me,” she said. “Or, at least, he was pretending to. All of those things he did, they were at my command. He was just playing along to keep me complacent, to keep me from realizing that I was his captive.”

 Vasher laughed a barking laugh, and Vivenna flushed. Her hair--responding to her mood for the first time since her shock at seeing peprin dead--turned red.

 “You laugh at me,” she said. “But I was just doing the best I could. I wanted to help my people in the upcoming war. Fight against Hallandren.”

 “Hallandren isn’t your enemy.”

 “It is,” she said sharply. “And it is planning to march on my people.”

 “The priests have good reasons for acting like they do,” Vasher said.

 Vivenna snorted. “Denth said that every man thinks he’d doing the right thing, in his head.”

 Vasher stared at her. “Denth is too smart for his own good. He was playing with you, princess.”

 “What do you mean?”

 “Didn’t it ever occur to you?” Vasher asked. “Attacking supply caravans? Rousing the Idris poor to rebel? Showing yourself to thug lords, making them think that Idris was working to undermine the Hallandren government? Princess, didn’t you ever stop to think that maybe you were the one on the wrong side?”

 Vivenna froze, feeling a chill.

 “Denth wasn’t working for you,” Vasher said. “He wasn’t even pretending to. Someone in this city hired him to start a war between Idris and Hallandren, and he’s spent these last few months using you to make it happen. I’m just trying to figure out why. Who’s behind it, and why would a war serve them?”

 Vivenna sat back, eyes wide.

 “You were the perfect pawn,” Vasher said. “Showing yourself off, reminding the people in the slums of their true heritage, giving Denth someone to rally behind--a figure to make the focus for his war. The Court of Gods is a hair’s breadth away from marching on your homeland. Not because they hate Idrians, but because they feel like Idris insurgents have already been attacking them.”

 He shook his head. “I couldn’t believe that you didn’t realize what you were doing. It was too perfect. I assumed you had to be working with him intentionally to start the war.” He eyed her. “I underestimated your stupidity. Get dressed. I don’t know if we have enough time to undo what you’ve done, but I intend to try.”

#

 The clothing felt strange. Too tight. The trousers pulled at her thighs, making her feel like she was exposed. It was odd not to have the swishing of skirts by her ankles.

 It was immodest, she knew, but what right had she to complain? So, she walked beside Vasher without comment, head bowed, hair too short to even put into a braid. They passed through the Idris slum, and Vivenna had to fight to keep herself from jumping at every sound, looking over her shoulder to see if someone were following her.

 Was that an urchin, wanting to steal the money she’d begged? Was that a group of thugs, wishing to sell her to Denth. Were those shadows grey-eyed Lifeless, come to attack and slaughter?

 They passed a waif beside the road, a young woman of indeterminable age but with a soot-covered face and bright eyes that watched them. Vivenna could read the hunger in those eyes. She could see that the woman was trying to decide whether or not to try stealing from Vivenna and Vasher.

 The sword in Denth’s hand was obviously enough to ward the girl away. Vivenna watched her scurry down an alleyway, feeling an odd sense of connection.

 Colors, she thought. Was that really me?

 No. She hadn’t even been as capable as that girl. Vivenna had been so naive that she’d been kidnapped without knowing it, then worked to start a war without realizing what she was doing.

 Didn’t you ever stop to think that maybe you were on the wrong side?

 She could see it, now that she knew what to look for. There was a reason that Denth had always taken her to meet with the less reputable elements in the city. Not only were they the ones a mercenary like him would know, but they would be more likely to prefer the chaos of war. They would be willing to rabble-rouse and create discontent in the slums, just to create a tension between the Hallandrens and the Idrians inside the city.

 Attacking the Hallandren supplies wouldn’t only make it more difficult to administer the war, it would make the priests more likely to attack in the first place. While they were still strong. The losses would also serve to make them more angry.

 “Denth made me think that the war was inevitable,” Vivenna whispered as they walked through the slums.

 “Then he fooled you quite soundly,” Vasher said. “War between Hallandren and Idris has been close for decades, but never inevitable. Getting this kingdom to attack requires convincing the Returned that it is a good idea--and they’re generally too focused on themselves to worry about something as disruptive as a war. Only an extended effort--first convincing the priests, then getting them to argue until the Gods believed them--would be successful.”

 They fell silent. Vivenna walked for a few more moments, staring ahead down the dirty streets with their colorful refuse.

 “I really am useless, aren’t I?” she whispered.

 Vasher glanced over at her.

 “First, my father sent my sister to marry the God King instead of me. I followed, but I couldn’t survive in the city. I didn’t even know what I was doing--Denth took me in on the very first day I was here. When I finally escaped him, I couldn’t make it a week on the street without getting robbed, beaten, and then captured. Now, worst of all, I find that I’ve single-handedly thrown my people into war.”

 Vasher snorted. “Don’t give yourself too much credit. Denth has been working on this war for a long time. From what I hear, he corrupted the Idris ambassador himself. Plus, there are elements in the Hallandren government--the ones who hired Denth in the first place--who want this conflict to happen.”

 “Do you have any guesses who they might be?”

 Vasher shrugged. “One of the Gods, I think--or perhaps a cabal of them. Maybe a group of priests, working on their own.”

 They fell silent again.

 “Why?” Vivenna finally asked.

 “How should I know?” Vasher asked. “I can’t even figure out who’s behind it.”

 “No,” Vivenna said. “Not that. I mean, why are you involved? Why do you care?”
 “Because,” Vasher said.

 “Because why?”

 Vasher sighed. “Look, princess. I’m not like Denth; I don’t talk like he does. I don’t have his tongue, and I don’t really like people in the first place. So, don’t expect me to chat with you. All right?”

 Vivenna closed her mouth sharply. Vasher nodded to himself, and they walked the rest of the way without further conversation.

 Their destination turned out to be a run-down building on the corner of a run-down intersection. As they approached, Vivenna paused to wonder exactly how slums like this one came to exist. Did people build them with streets close together and shoddy materials on purpose, or had these streets once been a richer section of town that had fallen into disrepair?

 Vasher grabbed her arm as she stood there, then pulled her up to the door, upon which he pounded on with the hilt of his sword. The door creaked open a second later, and a pair of nervous eyes glanced out.

 “Get out of the way,” Vasher said, testily shoving the door open the rest of the way and pulling Vivenna inside. A young man stumbled back from the doorway, pressing up against the wall of the hallway and letting Vasher and Vivenna pass. He closed the door behind them.

 Vasher let go of her and thumped his way down a set of stairs to the right. Vivenna followed more carefully, the dark stairwell reminding her of the cellar in Denth’s hideout. She shivered, and might have paused, save for the fact that the young man was following behind.

 At the bottom, fortunately, the similarities ended. This cellar had a wooden floor and walls, and while they were obviously aged, they looked sturdy. A rug sat in the middle of the room, and a group of men sat on the ground. A couple them rose as Vasher rounded the stairs.

 “Vasher!” one said. “Welcome. Do you want something to drink?”

 “No.”

 The men glanced uncomfortably at each other as Vasher tossed his sword toward the side of the room. It hit with a clank, skidding on the wood. Then, he reached back and pulled Vivenna forward.

 “Hair,” he said.

 She obliged, changing the color of her hair.

 The men watched with awe, then several of them bowed their heads. “Princess,” one whispered.

 “Tell them you don’t want them to go to war,” Vasher said.

 “I don’t,” she said. “I have never wanted my people to fight Hallandren. They would lose, almost certainly.”

 The men turned to Vasher. “But she was working with the slum lords. How did you get her away from them. Did you kidnap her?”

 Vasher looked at her. “You feel kidnapped, princess?”

 She paused. “No,” she said. “I’m free now. I’m sorry. I. . .didn’t realize what was going on before.”

 Vasher nodded, then pushed her aside, her part in the conversation obviously done. He left her and joined the men, squatting down as they sat back on the rug. Vivenna remained where she was. She wrapped her hands around herself, feeling the unfamiliar cloth of the tunic and coat.

 These men are Idrians, she realized, listening to their accents. And now they’ve seen me, their princess, wearing a man’s clothing.

 How is it that I can still care about such things, considering everything else that is happening?

 “All right,” Vasher said, still squatting. “What are you doing to stop this?”

 “Wait,” one of the men said. “You expect that to change our minds? A few words from the princess, and we’re supposed to believe everything you’ve been telling us?”

 “If Hallandren goes to war, you’re dead,” Vasher snapped. “Can’t you see that? What do you think will happen to the Idrians in these slums once Hallandren declares war? You think things are bad now, wait until you’re seen as sympathizers with the enemy.”

 “We know that, Vasher,” another said. “But, what do you expect us to do? Submit to Hallandren treatment of us? Cave in and worship their indolent Gods?”

 “I don’t really care what you do,” Vasher said, “as long as it doesn’t involve threatening the secruity of the Hallandren government.”

 “Maybe we should just admit that war is coming and fight,” another said. “Maybe the slum lords are right. Maybe the best thing to do is hope that Idris wins the war.”

 “They hate us,” another of them said, a man in his twenties with anger in his eyes. “They treat us worse than they do the statues in their streets! We’re less than Lifeless, to them.”

 I know that anger, Vivenna realized. I felt it. Feel it still. Anger at Hallandren.

 But, the man’s words rang hollow to her for some reason. The truth was, she hadn’t really felt any ire from the Hallandren people. If anything, she’d felt indifference. She was just another body on the street to them.

 Perhaps that’s why she hated them. She’d worked all of her life to become something important for them--she’d been dominated by the beast that was Hallandren and its God King. And then, in the end, the city and its people had simply ignored her. She didn’t matter to them.

 For some reason, that had been more infuriating than if they’d treated her poorly.

 “Too much has happened already,” one of the older men was saying. “The people are angry. We can’t stop the riots, Vasher. Not after that slaughter a few weeks back. The people are too angry.”

 Vasher pounded the floor with a fist. “That’s what they want! Can’t you fool see that you’re giving your enemies perfect scapegoats? Those Lifeless that attacked before weren’t given orders to kill by the government--you know that’s not allowed. Someone slipped a few broken Lifeless into the group, with orders to kill, so that the thing would turn bad!

 What? Vivenna thought.

 “The Hallandren theocracy is a bulky thing laden with bureaucratic foolishnes,” Vasher said. “It never moves unless someone prompts it! If we have riots in the street, that will be just what the war faction needs to gain control.”

 “It’s too late,” one of the men said.

 “No,” Vivenna said quietly. “Please.”

 The men in the circle paused, looking over at her. She walked over, then knelt before them. “Please, listen to this man.”

 “But princess,” one of the men said. “What can we do? The slum lords rile the people to anger. We have no power, compared to them.”

 “You must have some influence,” she said. “Otherwise Vasher would not have brought me to you.”

 “We’re fathers and workers,” another said. “We have no riches.”

 “But people listen to you?” she asked.

 “Some do.”

 “Then tell them that they are being manipulated,” Vivenna said, bowing her head. “Tell them to be stronger than I was. The men you speak of, the slum lords, they took me and tricked me into helping them fuel the war. I was a fool. But, the Idrians here in the slums--I’ve seen their strength. I know that they are more wise in these areas than I am. If you tell them what is happening, they can avoid being used.”

 The men fell silent.

 “I’m sorry for betraying you,” Vivenna said. She felt a tear on her cheek, and her hair had grown a pale white. “You can see. I. . .no longer have the control a princess and follower of Austre should show. I am a shame to you, but please, don’t let my failure doom you.

 “The Hallandrens don’t hate you. They barely even notice you. I know this is frustrating, but if you make them notice you by rioting and destroying, they will only be shaken into motion against our people. We all know how powerful they are, with their Lifeless armies.”

 “So we should just roll over?” the younger man asked. “Let them step on us? What does it matter if they do it unintentionally? We still get smashed.”

 “No,” Vivenna said. “There is a better way. You chose to come here to Hallandren, or at least your parents did. We must find a way to live with that choice. We must respect their government and their religion, for they did not force us to come to their kingdom and populate their city.

 “I will return to Idris, and will set up a method for those who feel trapped in the city to return to the highlands, where they will be given farms. There is plenty of land there.

 “For those who stay, we must find a way to bring attention to your hardships without bringing hatred as well. We will find a way. Remember, my sister is married to the God King himself. If we can get her attention, perhaps he can be persuaded to improve the slums. Not because he’s afraid of the violence our people might cause, but because of the pity he feels for their situation.”

 She sat where she was, feeling ashamed before these men. Ashamed to be crying, to be seen in the immodest clothing and with ragged, short hair. Ashamed to have failed them so soundly.

 How could I be taken in by Denth so easily? she thought with frustration. I, who was supposed to be in control. How could I let my anger turn me into a person who would ignore my people’s needs just because I wanted to see another people pay?

 “She makes good points,” one of the men finally said.

 “I don’t know,” said another. “I still feel it’s too late.”

 “If that’s the case,” Vivenna said, still looking at the floor, “what do you have to lose? You might as well try to stop the war. Think of the lives you could save. I promise. Idris will not forget you any longer. If you make peace with Hallandren, I will make certain that you are seen as heroes back in our homeland.”

 “Heroes, eh?” one of them said. “It would be nice to be known by my brothers as a hero, rather than the one who left the highlands to live in brazen Hallandren.”

 “Please,” Vivenna whispered.

 “I’ll see what I can do,” one of the men said, standing.

 Several of the others voiced agreement. They stood as well, shaking hands with Vasher. Vivenna remained kneeling as they left.

 Eventually, the room was empty save for her and Vasher. He sat down across from her.

 “Thanks,” he said.

 She nodded quietly.

 “You can look up now,” he said.

 “I. . . . I just feel so dirty. Denth used me. And, the thing is, I still feel like this should all be just a misunderstanding--that he’s really my friend, and that I should go to him and find out why he did what he did. Maybe we are all just confused.

 “But then, I remember the things I saw him do. He nearly caught me, when I ran from you. One of his associates killed a friend of mine. Killed him brutally, and Denth didn’t even seem to care. I feel so confused.”

 “You’re not the first one he’s taken in, princess,” Vasher said quietly. “Denth. . .he’s a careful one. A man like him can be evil to the core, but if he is charismatic and amusing, people will listen to him. They’ll even like him.”

 Vasher paused, then glanced away. “Me,” he said. “I’m not like that. I have trouble talking to other people. I get frustrated. I snap at them. Doesn’t make me very popular.”

 “But you are trying to stop the war,” Vivenna said, looking up. “That’s very noble. The people will love you for it, if you succeed.”

 He shrugged. “Assuming I can keep myself from beating the Colors out of them all for acting like idiots.”

 Despite everything else, Vivenna found herself smiling. A pacifist with temper-control issues, she thought. What an interesting combination to find in a person.

 A little like a devout Idrian princess who holds enough BioChromatic Breath to populate a small village.

 “There are more places like this,” Vasher said, standing and walking over to get his sword. “I can take you to them, if you want.”

 “Yes,” she said, trying not to look at the blade. It had a strange ability to make her feel sick, even still, just by looking at it. “Yes, I would like that.”

 Vasher nodded. “There won’t be many people at each one--I don’t have Denth’s connections and ability to bring large groups of important people together. The people I know are workers. We’ll have to go visit the dye vats, perhaps even some of the fields. But I can get you in to see a lot of the real Idrians in the area.”

 “Let’s get to work, then,” Vivenna said.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-four

 Siri watched Susebron with fondness as he ate a third dessert. Their night’s meal lay spread out on the table and floor, some dishes completely gone, others barely tasted. That first night, when Susebron had found out she was hungry and ordered a meal, had created a tradition. Now, they ordered food every night--though only after Siri did her act for the listening priests. Susebron claimed to find it very amusing, though she noticed the curiosity in his eyes as he watched her.

 That was over for the evening, however, as was their meal. Susebron had proven to have quite a sweet tooth, now that constraints of watching priests and their instruction on etiquette were gone.

 “You should probably watch out,” she noted as he finished another pastry. “If you eat too many of those, you will gain weight.”

 He reached for his writing board. No I won’t.

 “Yes you will,” she said, smiling. “That’s the way it works.”

 Not for Gods, he wrote. I know some of this, for my mother explained it. Some men become more bulky if they exercise a lot, and become fat if they eat a lot. That doesn’t happen to Returned. We always look the same.

 Siri frowned, but she really couldn’t offer argument. After all, what did she know of Returned?

 Is food in Idris like this? Susebron wrote.

 Siri smiled. He was always so curious about her homeland. She could sense a longing in him, the wish to be free of his palace and see the outside. And yet, he was so good. He didn’t want to be disobedient, even when the ones who made the rules were obviously harsh.

 “I really need to work on corrupting you some more,” she noted.

 He paused. What does that have to do with food?

 “Nothing,” she said. “But it’s true nonetheless. You’re far too good a person, Susebron.”

 Sarcasm? he wrote. I certainly hope that it is.

 “Only half,” she said, laying down on her stomach and watching him across their impromptu picnic.

 Half sarcasm? He wrote. Is this something new?

 “No,” she said, sighing. “The thing is, Seb, there is truth sometimes even in sarcasm. I don’t really want to corrupt you, but I do think that you’re just too obedient for your own good. You need to be a little more reckless. Impulsive.”

 It’s hard to be impulsive when you are locked in a palace surrounded by hundreds of servants, he wrote.

 “Good point.”

 However, I have been thinking about the things which you have said. And about our problem. Please don’t be mad at me.

 Siri perked up, noting the embarrassment in his expression. “All right. What did you do?”

 I talked to my priests, he said. With the Artisan’s Script.

 Siri felt a moment of panic. “You told them about us?”

 No, No, he wrote quickly. I did tell them I was worried about having a child. I asked why my father died right after he had a child.

 Siri frowned. Part of her wished that he’d let her handle such negotiations. However, she discarded that frustration. She didn’t want to keep him pinned down like his priests did. His life that was being threatened--he deserved the chance to work on the problem too.

 “Good,” she said.

 You’re not mad?

 She shrugged. “I was just telling you to be more impulsive and active! I can’t really complain that you’re being proactive. What did they say?”

 He erased, then continued. They told me not to worry. They said everything would be all right. So, I asked them again, and again they gave me a vague answer.

 Siri nodded slowly.

 It hurts me to write this, but I’m beginning to think that you are right. They are hiding things from me. I’ve noticed that my guards and Awakeners are staying particularly close lately. We even skipped going to the court of judgement yesterday.

 “That’s a bad sign,” she agreed. “I haven’t had much luck finding out what is going to happen. I’ve ordered in three other storytellers, but none of them have had information any better than what Dust gave me.”

 You still think it has to do with the Breath I hold?

 She nodded. “Remember what I said about my conversation with Tridees? He talked about that Breath like it was some treasure to be guarded. Something to be passed down from generation to generation, like a family tapestry.”

 In one of the children’s stories in my book, he wrote, there is a magic sword. A young boy is given it by his grandfather, and it turns out the sword was a heirloom--the symbol of kinghood in the land.

 “What are you saying?” she asked.

 Perhaps the entire monarchy of Hallandren is nothing more than a conveinance. A way to guard the Breath. The only way to store Breath is inside of a person. So, they created a monarchy with line of God Kings who could take the treasure and pass it from father to son.

 Siri nodded slowly. “That would mean that the God King is more of a placeholder than anything else. A sheath for a magic weapon that is being held and guarded.”

 Exactly, Susebron wrote, hand moving quickly. It makes sense. They had to make my family kings because of how much Breath was in that treasure. And, because of that, they had to give it to a Returned--otherwise their king and their Gods might have been in conflict for power.

 “But how do they find a Returned child each time?” Siri asked. “It seems convenient that the God King always bears a stillborn son who becomes Returned. . . .”

 She trailed off. Susebron saw it too.

 Unless the next God King isn’t really the son of the current one, he wrote, hand shaking slightly.

 “Austre!” Siri said. “God of Colors! That’s it. Somewhere in the kingdom, a baby died and Returned. That’s why it’s so urgent that I get pregnant! They already have the next God King, now they just need to keep up the farce. They marry me to you, hope for a child as quickly as possible, then switch the baby for the Returned one.”

 Then they kill me and somehow take my Breaths away, he wrote. And give it to this child, who can become the next God King. Nobody knows about the swap, because only the priests ever see the God King, particularly when he is a baby. By the time he is displayed, it will be hard to tell exactly how old he is.

 Siri sat back, frowning. “But, if any of that is true, then that asks another question. Why even bother with changing God Kings? Why not just leave one man holding the Breath? It makes you live such a long time, supposedly?”

 I don’t know, Susebron wrote. It doesn’t seem to make sense, does it? Maybe they are worried about keeping a single God King captive that long. Children are easier to control, perhaps?

 “If that’s the case, they would want to change more often,” Siri said. “Some of those God Kings lasted centuries. Of course, it could just have to do with how rebellious they think their king is. How controllable.”

 But, I do everything I’m supposed to! You just complained that I am too obedient.

 “Compared to me, you are,” she said, sitting up and leaning back. “But, maybe from their viewpoint, you’re a wildman. After all, you did hide that book your mother gave you. You also got me to teach you how to write. Perhaps they know you well enough to realize that you weren’t going to stay docile for much longer. So, now that they have an opportunity to replace you, they’re intending to take it.”

 Maybe, he wrote, looking thoughtful.

 Siri thought through their conclusions again. Looked at critically, she could see that they were just really speculations. They had no hard proof of any of it.

 Yet, everyone said that the other Returned couldn’t have children, and so why would the God King be different? That might just be a means of obfuscating the fact that they were bringing in a new person to be God King when they found one.

 That still didn’t answer the most important question. What were they going to do to Susebron to get his Breaths away from him? It had to be something violent and involuntary--they wouldn’t risk giving him the opportunity to use the Breaths against them to save his life.

 Susebron leaned back, staring up at the dark ceiling. Siri watched him, noting the look of sadness in his eyes. “What?” she asked.

 He just shook his head.

 “Please? What is it?”

 He sat for a moment, then looked down, writing. If what you say is true, then the woman who raised me was not my mother. I would have been born to someone random, out in the countryside. The priests would have taken me once I returned, then raised me in the palace as the ‘son’ of the God King they’d just killed.

 Siri paused. Seeing him in pain made her insides twist. She moved around the blanket, sitting beside him, putting her arms around him.

 She’s the only person to have shown me real kindness in my life, he wrote. The priests, they revere me and care for me--or, at least, I assumed that they did. However, they never really loved me. Only my mother did that. And, now I’m not sure I even know who she is.

 “If she raised you, she’s your mother,” Siri said. “It doesn’t matter who gave birth to you.”

 He didn’t respond to that. He’d spoken of her before, how he’d easily outlived her. After all, though he looked to be twenty, he was actually over fifty years old.

 “Maybe she was your real mother,” Siri said. “After all, she helped you deceive the priests in keeping that book. Plus, she cared for you in a way they never did. It makes sense that, if they were going to bring you to the palace and raise you in secret, they might as well bring your mother too. Who better to care for you?”

 He nodded, then scribbled on the board with one hand--the other around Siri’s waist. Perhaps you are right. Though it now seems suspicious to me that she would die as she did. She was one of the few who could have told me the truth.

 This seemed to make him even more sad, and Siri pulled him close, laying her head on his chest.

 Please, he wrote. Tell me of your family.

 “My parents were often frustrated with me,” Siri said. “But, they did love me. Do love me. I think they would have been far less frustrated with me if they didn’t. They just wanted me to do what they thought was right. And. . .well, the more time I spend in Hallandren, the more I wish I would have listened to them, at least a little bit.

 “Ridger was right above me, and he was rather sweet to me when we were younger. I was always getting him into trouble. He was the heir, and I had him thoroughly corrupted, at least until he got old enough to realize he had duties he needed to attend to. Still, he’s a little like you. Very kind hearted, always trying to do what is right. He didn’t eat as many sweets, though.”

 Susebron smiled faintly, squeezing her shoulder.

 “Then, there was Fafen. I didn’t really know her that well. She joined a monastery when I was still quite young--and I was glad for her sacrifice. It’s kind of seen as a duty, in Idris, to provide at least one child for the monasteries. They’re the ones who grow the food for the poor, and who take care of things that need to be done around the city. Pruning, washing, painting. Anything to be of service.”

 He reached over. A little like a king, he wrote. Living a life to serve others.

 “Sure,” Siri said. “Only, they don’t get locked up, and they can stop doing it, if they want. Either way, I’m glad it was Fafen and not me. I would have gone crazy living as a monk. They have to be pious all the time, and are supposed to be the least ostentatious in the city.”

 Not a good match for your hair, he wrote.

 “Definitely,” she said.

 Though, he wrote, frowning slightly. It’s stopped changing colors as often lately.

 “I’ve had to learn to control it better,” Siri said with a grimace. “Against my better judgment, I must say. People can read me too easily by it. Here.” She changed it from black to yellow, and he smiled, running his fingers through its lengthy locks.

 “After Fafen,” Siri said, “there’s just the eldest, Vivenna. She’s the one you were supposed to marry, and she spent her entire life preparing to move to Hallandren and live in the palace.”

 She must hate me, Susebron wrote. Growing up, knowing she would have to leave her family and live with a man she didn’t know.

 “Nonsense,” Siri said. “Vivenna looked forward to it. I don’t think she can feel hatred. She was always just calm and careful and perfect.”

 Susebron frowned.

 “I sound bitter, don’t it?” Siri said, sighing. “I don’t mean to. I really do love Vivenna. She was always there, watching out for me. But, it seemed to me when I was younger that she made too many efforts to cover up for me. She was always there, the big sister, pulling me out of trouble, scolding me calmly, then seeing that I wasn’t punished as much as I should have been.

 “But, in the end, I have to admit that she really did care for me. They’re all probably back home right now, worried sick about me.”

 You sound like you’re worried about them, he wrote.

 “I am,” she said. “I’ve been listening to the priests argue in the Court. It. . .doesn’t sound good, Seb. There are a lot of Idrians in the city, and they’re being very reckless. The city guard was forced to send troops into one of the slums a few weeks back, and there have been various acts of vandalism. I’m afraid that Hallandren is going to attack.”

 Susebron didn’t write a response, but instead wrapped his arm around her again, pulling her close. It felt good to be held against him. Very good.

 After a few minutes, he put his arm away and wrote again, awkwardly erasing first. I was wrong, you know.

 “About what?”

 About one of the things I said earlier. I wrote that my mother was the only person to ever show me love and kindness. That’s not true. There’s been another.

 He trailed off with his writing, looking down at her. Then, he glanced at the board again. You didn’t have to show me kindness. You could have hated me for taking you from your family and your homeland. Instead, you taught me to read, befriended me. Loved me.

 He stared at her. She stared at him. Then, hesitant, he leaned down and kissed her.

 Oh, dear. . . . Siri thought, a dozen objections popping into her head. Yet, she found it difficult to move, to resist, or to do anything.

 Anything other than kiss him back.

 She felt hot. She knew that they needed to stop, lest the priesthood get exactly what they were waiting for. She understood all of these things. Yet, those objects began to seem less and less rational as she kissed him, as her breathing grew more hurried.

 He paused, obviously uncertain what to do next. He likely only knew of kissing from the end of his children’s stories. Siri looked up at him, breathing heaver, then pulled him down to kiss him again, feeling her hair bleed to a deep, passionate red.

 At that point, she stopped caring about anything else. Susebron didn’t know what to do. But, unfortunately, she did.

 I really am too impulsive, she thought as she pulled off her shift. I really need to get better at that.

 Some other time.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-five

 That night, Lightsong dreamed of T’Telir burning. Of the God King dead, and of soldiers in the streets. Of Lifeless killing people in colorful clothing.

 And of a black sword.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-six

 Vivenna choked down the rest of her meal. The dried meat tasted strongly of fish, but she had learned that by plugging her nose, she could ignore most of the flavor. She ate every piece, then washed it down with a few mouthfuls of warm boiled water.

 She was alone in the room. It was a small chamber built onto the side of a building in the slums. Vasher had paid a few coins for it, and for silence, though he wasn’t there at the moment. After dropping her off, he’d rushed off to see to something.

 She leaned back, food consumed, closing her eyes. She’d reached the point where she was so exhausted, she actually found it difficult to sleep. The fact that the room was so small didn’t help. She couldn’t even stretch out all the way.

 Vasher hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said that he’d be able to get her in to see a lot of people. However, he also hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said it would be rirorous. Stop after stop--each meeting only attended by a few people--she spoke with the Idrians, consoling them, offering them promises, and begging them not to prompt Hallandren to war.

 It was a very different experience from when Denth had touted her around. There were no restaurants. No dinners with men in fine clothing and guards. No clandestine meetings attended by hundreds, or even dozens. Just group after group of tired, working-class men and women. Many of them weren’t rebellious, and a large number of them didn’t even live in the slums. But they were part of the Idrian community in T’Telir, and they had an effect on how their friends and family felt.

 Vasher didn’t ask her if she wanted to continue, he simply led her from location to location, expecting her to keep up. And so she did, forcing herself onward. Meeting with the people was emotionally draining, but she did it anyway, pleading with them, admitting her fault.

 She wasn’t certain if she could fix what she had done. But she was willing to try. This determination actually seemed to gain her a bit of respect from Vasher. It was much more reluctantly given than Denth’s respect had been.

 Denth was fooling me the entire time, she told herself. I have to remember that. It was hard, sometimes.

 The problem facing her, then, was how to define herself now that everything she’d been, and everything she’d tried, had collapsed around her.

 She couldn’t be Vivenna the confident princess anymore. Not after being betrayed and being cast out. The person she had been was dead, left behind in that cellar where she’d seen Peprin’s bloody corpse. That woman’s confidence, such as it had been, had come from naiveté. She hadn’t known how helpless she was, and so she’d been able to act secure and in control.

 Now she knew. She knew how easily she had been played, and how laughable her efforts really had been. Now she knew the cost of ignorance, and she understood what it was like to live in poverty. Or, rather, she knew what it was to glimpse what it was like to live in poverty.

 Yet, she couldn’t be that woman--the waif of the streets, the thief, the beaten down wretch. That wasn’t her. The life she had lived before experiencing the streets had prepared her too well to let her define herself based only on a single week’s worth of trauma.

 And where did that leave her? The woman she’d been playing for the last few days with Vasher? The penitent, quiet princess who sat with bowed head, pleading with the peasants to listen to Vasher’s words? This, too, was something of an act. She really did feel sorry. However, she was using her stripped pride as a tool to manipulate. That wasn’t her.

 Who was she?

 She stood, feeling cramped in the tiny room, and pushed open the door. The neighborhood outside wasn’t quite a slum, but wasn’t rich, either. It was simply a place where people lived. There were enough colors along to street to be welcoming, but enough doors and small rooms to indicate that many who lived here were only a few steps away from poverty.

 She walked along the street, careful not to stray too far from the room Vasher had rented. She passed trees, admiring several of them, which were in bloom.

 Who was she really? What was left, when one stripped away the princess and the hatred of Hallandren? Both were things that had defined her, even if she’d been too controled to let her hatred out very often.

 She was determined. That part of her, she liked. She’d forced herself to become what was expected. She’d worked hard, sacrificing, to obtain her goal. Yet, she was also a hypocrite. She had insisted on wearing rich dresses to preserve her way of life, even when it had been ostentatious to do so.

 Now she knew what it was to be truly humble, without ostentation at all. Compared to that, her former life seemed more loud and demanding of attention than any colorful skirt or shirt.

 She did believe in Austre. She loved the teachings of the Five Visions, and the way of life they encouraged. Humility. Sacrifice. Seeing another’s problems before your own. Yet, she was beginning to worry if she--along with many others--had taken this view too far to the extreme, looping around in their desire to seem humble so that they lapped and became arrogant instead. The Five Visions encouraged people to respect others. It seemed to her that when her faith had become about clothing instead of people, it had taken a wrong turn.

 She wanted to learn to Awaken. Why? What did that say about her? That she was willing to look at something that her religion rejected, just because it would make her powerful?

 No, that wasn’t it. At least, she hoped that wasn’t it. Looking back on her recent life, she felt frustrated at how helpless she had been so much of the time.

 That was why she’d trained so hard with the tutors, learning everything they offered. And, that was why she wanted to learn how to Awaken. She wanted to hold as much information as she could. She wanted to be as prepared as possible for the problems that might come at her.

 She wanted to be capable. That might be arrogant, but it was the truth. She wanted to learn everything she could about how to survive in the world. The most humbling aspect of her time in T’Telir was her ignorance. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

 She nodded to herself.

 Time to practice, then, she thought, returning to the room. Inside, she pulled out a piece of rope--the one that Vasher had used to tie her up, the first thing that she had Awakened. She’d since retrieved the Breath from it.

 She went back outside, holding the rope between her fingers, twisting it, thinking. The Commands that Denth taught me, she thought. They were simple phrases. Hold things. Protect me.

 He’d implied that the intent was important. When she’d Awakened the ropes, she’d made them move as if part of her body. So, it was more than just the Command. The Command brought the life, but the intent--the instructions from her mind--brought focus.

 She paused beside a large tree with thin, blossom-laden branches that drooped toward the ground. Then, she touched the trunk and knelt beside a fallen branch. She held out the rope.

 “Hold things,” she Commanded, reflexively letting out some of her Breath. She felt a moment of panic as her sense of the world dimmed just slightly.

 The rope twitched. However, instead of drawing color from the tree, the Awakening pulled color from her tunic. The garment bled grey, and the rope moved, wrapping like a snake around the branch and pulling tight. Wood cracked slightly as the rope covered it. However, the rope also twisted in an odd pattern, writhing.

 Vivenna watched, frowning, until she figured out what was happening. The rope was twisting around the grass, trying to hold it as well. The very end was wrapping around her finger, twisting around it as well.

 “Stop,” Vivenna said.

 Nothing happened. It continued to pull tight.

 “Your Breath to mine,” she Commanded.

 The rope stopped twisting and her Breath returned. She shook the rope free, then eyed it.

 All right, she thought. ‘Hold things’ works, but it’s not very specific. What if I tried something else?

 “Hold that branch,” she Commanded. Again, the Breath left her. More of it this time. Her trousers drained of color, and the rope end twisted, wrapping around the branch. The rest of it, however, remained still.

 She smiled in satisfaction. So, the more complicated the command, the more Breath it requires.

 She took back her Breath. As Vasher had indicated, drawing that much in didn’t cause her senses to be shocked, for it was a restoration back to a normal state for her. If she’d gone several days without that Breath, then drawn it in, she’d have been shocked by the power of it. A little like taking a first bite of something very flavorful.

 She eyed her clothing, which was now completely grey. Out of curiosity, she tried Awakening the rope again. Nothing happened.

 Now what? she thought. I wonder if there’s a way to get the rope to be more useful. Could she put the Breath into it now, then command it to hold something later? How would she even phrase that?

 “Hold things that I tell you to hold,” she Commanded.

 Nothing happened.

 “Hold that branch when I tell you.”

 Again, nothing.

 “Hold whatever I say.”

 Nothing.

 A voice came from behind. “Tell it to ‘Hold when thrown.”

 Vivenna jumped, spinning. Vasher stood behind her, Nightblood held before him, point down. He had his pack over his shoulder.

 Vivenna flushed, glancing back at the rope. However, she did as he suggested. “Hold when thrown,” she said, touching the twig on the ground and drawing her color from it.

 The rope remained limp. So, she tossed it to the side, hitting one of the hanging tree branches.

 The rope immediately twisted about, locking the branches together and holding them tightly.

 “That’s useful,” Vivenna said.

 Vasher raised an eyebrow. “Useful, perhaps. Dangerous for certain.”

 “Why?”

 “Get the rope back now.”

 Vivenna paused, realizing that the rope had twisted around branches that were too high for her to reach. She hopped up, trying to grab it.

 “I prefer to use a longer rope,” Vasher said, raising Nightblood by the blade and hooking the rope with the crossguard, then pulling the branches down so that Vivenna could touch the rope and get her Breath back. “If you always keep ahold of one end, then you don’t have to worry about your Breath getting taken from you. Plus, you can Awaken when you need to, rather than leaving a bunch of Breath locked into a rope that you may or may not need.”

 Vivenna nodded.

 “Come on,” he said, walking back toward the room. “You’ve obviously made enough of a spectacle for one day.”

 Vivenna followed, noticing that several people on the street had stopped to watch her. “How did they notice?” she asked. “I wasn’t that obvious about what I was doing.”

 Vasher snorted. “And how many people in T’Telir walk around in grey clothing?”

 Vivenna paused, then followed Vasher into the cramped room. He set down his pack, then leaned Nightblood against one wall. Vivenna eyed the sword as he closed the door. She still wasn’t certain what to make of the weapon. She felt a little nauseous every time she looked at it, and the memory of how violently she’d felt sick when touching it was still fresh inside of her.

 Plus, there had been that voice in her head. Had she really heard it? Vasher had been characteristically tight-lipped when she’d asked about it, rebuffing her questions.

 “Aren’t you an Idrian?” Vasher asked, drawing her attention from the sword as he settled down, back to the door.

 “Last I checked,” she replied.

 “You seem a bit fascinated with Awakening, for a follower of Asture.” He spoke with eyes closed as he rested his head back against the door.

 “I’m not a very good Idrian,” she said, sitting down, glancing to the side. “Not anymore. I might as well learn to use these Breaths I have.”

 Vasher nodded. “Good enough rational. I’ve never really understood why suddenly Austrism turned is back on Awakening.”

 “Suddenly?” she asked.

 He nodded, eyes still closed. “Wasn’t like that, before the Manywar.”

 “Really?”

 “Of course,” he said.

 He often spoke that way, mentioning things that seemed farfetched to her, yet saying them as if he knew exactly what he was talking about. No implication of conjecture. No wavering. As if he knew everything. She could see why sometimes it was hard for him to get along with people.

 “Anyway,” Vasher said, opening his eyes. “Did you eat all of that squid?”

 She nodded. “Is that what that was?”

 “Yes,” he said, opening his pack, getting out another dried chunk of meat. He held it up. “Want more?”

 She felt sick. “No, thank you.”

 He paused, noticing the look in her eyes. “What? Did I give you a bad piece?”

 She shook her head.

 “What?” he asked.

 “It’s nothing.”

 He raised an eyebrow, and met her eyes.

 “I said it’s nothing.” She glanced away. “I just don’t care for fish very much.”

 “You don’t?” he asked. “I’ve been feeding it to you for five days now.”

 She nodded silently.

 “You ate it every time.”

 “I’m dependant upon you for food,” she said simply. “I don’t intend to complain about what you give me.”

 He frowned, then tore himself a bit of squid and began chewing on it. He still wore his torn, almost-ragged clothing, but Vivenna had now been around him enough to tell that he kept it clean. He apparently had enough resources that he could have gotten new clothing, had he wanted. After all, he’d provided two sets of new clothing for her. Yet, he chose to wear the worn and tattered things instead.

 “You aren’t what I expected,” he finally said.

 “I would have been,” she said. “A few weeks ago.”

 “No, I doubt it,” he said, gnawing on his chunk of squid. “That tenacious spirit you’ve got doesn’t come from a single week of living on the streets. Neither does that sense of martyrdom.”

 She met his eyes. “I want you to teach me more about Awakening.”

 He shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

 “I don’t even know how to answer that,” she said. “Denth taught me a few Commands, but that was the same day that you took me captive.”

 Vasher nodded. They sat silent for a few minutes.

 “Well?” she finally asked. “Are you going to say anything?”

 “I’m thinking,” he said.

 She raised an eyebrow.

 He scowled. “I told you I wasn’t good at chatting. And I’m worse at teaching. These are things I’ve done for a very, very long time. I always have trouble trying to explain them.”

 “It’s okay,” she said. “Take your time.”

 He shot her a glance. “Don’t patronize me.”

 “I’m not patronizing, I’m being polite.”

 “Well next time, be polite with less condescension in your voice,” he said.

 Condescension? she thought with annoyance. I wasn’t condescending! Didn’t he realize that she’d just realized how arrogant she’d been for most of her life, and was now trying to be humble?

 She eyed him as he sat, chewing on his dried squid, looking thoughtful. The more time she spent with him, the less frightening she found him, but the more frustrating.

 He is a dangerous man, she reminded herself. He has left corpses strewn all over the city, using that sword of his to make people slaughter each other.

 She had trusted Denth too quickly. She wouldn’t make the same mistake with Vasher. Still, there was a better feeling about him, now that she was comign to know him.

 Or, does he just want me to think that? Is he, perhaps, using me just like Denth did? He says he wants to stop the war, but the only thing I have on that is his word.

 It wasn’t the first time during the last five days that she’d had such thoughts. She’d considered running from him on several occasions, but had eventually decided that she’d be a fool to try it. He had saved her from those men, and he did seem to be trying to do things that would benefit Idris.

 She just intended to keep her eyes open a little wider from now on. She only wished Vasher were a little easier to get along with. Denth had been glib and charismatic. Vasher, on the other hand. . . .

 “All right,” he said. “I guess this is for the best. I’m getting tired of you walking around with that bright aura of yours that you can’t even use.”

 “Well?”

 “Well, I think we should start with theory,” he said. “There are four levels of BioChromatic entities. The first, and most spectacular, are the Returned. Those are what they name Gods here in Hallandren, but I’d rather call Sentient BioChromatic Manifestations in a Deceased Host. What is odd about them is that they’re the only naturally occurring BioChromatic entity, which is theoretically the explanation for why they can’t use or bestow their BioChromatic Investiture. Of course, the fact is that every living being is born with a certain BioChromatic Investiture, so the Type One Entities are probably the most natural of the entities. This could also explain why they retain sentience.”

 Vivenna blinked. That wasn’t what she had been expecting. She’d thought that Vasher would stumble through an explanation of several basic Commands, not lecture her like a tutor from her youth.

 “You’re more interested in Type Two and Type Three entities,” Vasher continued. “Type Two being Mindless Manifestations in a Deceased Host. They are rather cheap to make, even with awkward Commands. This is per the Law of BioChromatic Parallelism: The Closer a host is to a living shape and form, the easier it is to Awaken. BioChroma is the power of life, and so it seeks patterns of life. That, however, leads us to another law--the Law of Comparable Awakening. That states that the amount of Breath required to Awaken something isn’t necessarily indicative of its power once Awakened. A piece of cloth cut into a square and a piece of cloth cut into the shape of a person will take very different amounts of Breath to Awaken, but will be essentially the same once they have been Invested.

 “The explanation for this is simple. Some people think of Awakening like pouring water into a cup. You pour until the cup is filled, and then the object comes to life. This is a false parallelism. Instead, think of Awakening like beating down a door. You pound and pound, and some doors are easier to open than others, but once they’re open, they do about the same thing.”

 He glanced at her. “Understand?”

 “Uh. . . .” she said slowly. She’d spent her youth training with the tutors, but this was a little bit beyond even their methods of teaching. “It’s a little dense,” she finally said.

 “Well, do you want to learn or not?” he asked in annoyance.

 You asked me if I understood, she thought. And I answered. However, she didn’t voice her objections. Better for him to keep talking.

 “Type Two BioChromatic Entities,” he said, “are what people in Hallandren call Lifeless. They are, in a way, like Type One entities--only with some very large differences. They only require a few Breaths to Awaken--anywhere between one and fifty, depending on the Commands used--and they feed off of their own color when being Invested. They don’t present an aura when Awakened, but the Breath sustains them, keeping them from needing to eat. They can die, however, and need a special alcohol solution to remain functional past a few years of Awakened status. Because of their organic host, their Breath clings to the body, and cannot be withdrawn once Invested.”

 “I know a little about them,” Vivenna said, “Denth and his team have a Lifeless.”

 Vasher fell silent. “Yes,” he finally said. “I know.”

 Vivenna frowned, noticing a strange look in his eyes. They sat for a few moments.

 “You were talking about Lifeless and their Commands?” she finally prompted.

 Vasher nodded. “They need a Command to Awaken them, just like anything else. Even your religion teaches about Commands--it says that Austre is the one who Commands the Returned to come back, if only for a short time.”

 She nodded.

 “Understanding the theory of Commands is tough, however. Take Lifeless, for instance. It’s taken us centuries to discover the most efficient ways to bring a body back to a Lifeless state. Even still, we’re not sure if we understand how it works. I guess this is the first thing I’d like to get across to you--that BioChroma is complicated, and we really don’t understand most of it.”

 “What do you mean?” She asked.

 “Just what I said,” Vasher replied, shrugging. “We don’t really know what we’re doing.”

 “But, you sound so technical in your descriptions.”

 “We’ve figured out some things,” he said. “But, if you think about it, Awakeners really haven’t been around that long--a couple of centuries. The more you learn about it, the more you’re realize that there are more things about BioChroma that we don’t know than there are things we do. Why are the specific Commands so important, and why do they have to be spoken in your native language? What brings Type One entities--Returned--back to life in the first place? Why are Lifeless so dull-minded, while Returned completely sentient?”

 Vivenna nodded slowly.

 “Creating Type Three BioChromatic Entities is what we traditionally call ‘Awakening,’” Vasher continued. “That’s when you create a BioChromatic manifestation in an organic host that is far removed from having been alive. Woods and cloths work the best, though sticks, reeds, and other plant matter can be used. I’ve heard of people using bones before, but while Awakening them is cheap, it doesn’t do much--bones are too rigid to move around.

 “Type Three Entities are interesting in that the BioChroma doesn’t stick to them very well. The result is that they require quite a bit of Investiture--often well over a hundred Breaths--to Awaken them. The benefit of this, of course, is that the Breath can be drawn back out again for reuse. This has allowed for quite a bit more experimentation, and that has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of Awakening techniques.”

 “You mean the Commands?” Vivenna asked.

 “Right,” Vasher said. “As you’ve seen, most basic Commands work easily. If it’s something the object could accomplish, and it is stated in a simple way, the Command will usually work.”

 “But, I tried some simple Commands,” she said. “On the rope. They didn’t work.”

 “Those may have sounded simple, but they weren’t. Simple Commands are only two words long. Grab Something. Hold Something. Move Up. Move down. Twist around. That sort of thing. Even some two word commands can be more complicated, and it takes practice visualizing--or, well, imagining. Well, using your mind to--”

 “I understand that part,” she said. “Like flexing a muscle.”

 He nodded. “Protect me, though only two words, is a complicated Command. So are others, like Fetch Something. You have to give the right impulse to the object, and that simply comes with practice.

 “This area is where you really begin to understand how little we know BioChroma. There are probably thousands of Commands we haven’t figured out. The simple ones are easy, but the more words you add, the more complicated things become. You not only have to get the exact right combination, but you have to have the right mental image to go with it. Discovering a new Command can take years of study, and even then, many people who find them probably don’t share them. Knowledge, after all, is it’s own power.”

 “Like the discovery of a new Command to make Lifeless,” she said thoughtfully. “Those who had it could make a Lifeless for one breath, while the rest of the world needed fifty. That disparity started the Manywar.”

 “Yes,” Vasher said. “Or, at least, that was part of what caused the war. Anyway, that’s not really important. The thing to understand is that we’re still children when it comes to Awakening and Commands. It doesn’t help that a lot of people who learn new, valuable Commands never share them, and probably die with the knowledge.”

 Vivenna nodded, noticing how his discussion grew more relaxed and conversational as he got into the topic. Still, his knowledge on the subject surprised her.

 He sits on the floor, she thought, eating a dry piece of squid, not having shaven in weeks and wearing clothing that looks like it’s about to fall off. Yet, in the right situation, he talks like a scholar giving a speech. He carries a sword that leaks black smoke and causes people to kill each other, yet he appears to be working so hard to stop a war. Who is this man?

 She glanced to the side, to where the sword Nightblood stat leaning against the wall. Perhaps it was the discussion of the technical aspects of BioChroma, or perhaps it was simply her growing suspicion that she knew what wasn’t right about the weapon.

 “Is there a Type Four BioChomatic thing?” Vivenna asked, glancing back at Vasher.

 He fell silent.

 “Type One is a human body with sentience,” Vivenna said. “Type Two is a human body without sentience. Type three is an Awakened object like a rope--an object with no sentience. Is there a way to create an Awakened object with sentience? Like a Returned, but inside of something other than a human body?”

 Vasher stood. “We’ve covered enough for one day.”

 “You didn’t answer my question.”

 “And I’m not going to,” he said with annoyance. “And I advice you never to ask it again. Understand?” He glanced at her, and she felt a chill at the harshness in his voice.

 “All right,” she said, though she didn’t glance away.

 He snorted to himself, then reached into his large pack, pulling something out. “Here,” he said. “I brought you something.”

 He tossed a long, thin object to the floor. It was wrapped in cloth. Vivenna stood, walking over to pull the cloth back. Inside was a sword. A thin, well-polished dueling blade.

 “I don’t know how to use one of these,” she said, looking up.

 “Then learn,” he replied. “If you know how to fight, you’ll be far less annoying to have around. I won’t have to keep pulling you out of trouble all the time.”

 She flushed. “One time.”

 “It’ll happen again,” he said.

 Vivenna looked down. Wielding a sword certainly wasn’t something that would have been proper for an Idrian princess. However, she doubted she really fit that title anymore. She picked up the sheathed sword, surprised at how light it was, and tied it around her waist.

 “Let’s go,” Vasher said. “I’ve got another group of Idrians for us to visit.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-Seven

 Lightsong tried not to think about his dreams. He tried not to think about the image of T’Telir in flames. Of people dying. Of the world, essentially, ending.

 He stood atop his palace, looking over the Court of the Gods. His palace had a flat section to the side, crafted like a balcony or an observation patio. Wind blew his hair, and the sun was close to setting. Already, torches were arrayed on the lawns, providing light for various Gods and Goddesses who sought evening entertainment.

 It was so perfect. The palaces arrayed in a circle around the lawn, lit by torches and lanterns displaying the colors of their occupant. He could tell each color with exactness, and some of the lanterns were off.

 Some of the places were dark; the buildings currently held no Gods.

 What will happen if too many others Return before we kill ourselves before a petition? he thought idly. Would they build more palaces? As far as he knew, there had always been enough space.

 At the head of the Court sat the God King’s palace, tall, black, blocky. It had obviously been built so that it would dominate even the extravagant palaces of the Gods. It threw a wide, warped shadow across the back wall of the Court.

 Perfect. So perfect. The torches were arranged in patterns he could only see by standing up atop a building. The grass was kept perfectly manicured, and the massive wall tapestries were changed often so that they showed no wear, stains, or fading.

 The people put forth such effort for their Gods.

 Meeting with Allmother had reminded him of days he hadn’t thought of in a long time. Calmseer. She had been his mentor when he’d first Returned, the finest Goddess he’d ever known. Blushweaver was jealous of his memories of her, but she couldn’t understand that their relationship hadn’t been romantic.

 Calmseer had come closer to being a God than anyone Lightsong had seen. She’d done as Allmother now tried, meeting and listening to the people, but there had been genuine concern in her regard for them. Not a worry that they would stop worshiping. Not an arrogance of presumed superiority, mixed with benevolence for those who were so far beneath them, like Lightsong saw in most of the other Gods.

 Real kindness. Real love. Real mercy.

 And yet, even Calmseer had felt inadequate. She had often said she felt guilty because she couldn’t live up to what people expected. But, how could she? How could anyone? In the end, he suspected this might have been what had driven her answer a Petition.

 There had only been one way, in her estimation, to be the Goddess everyone demanded she be. And that was to give up her life for her people.

 They push us into it, Lightsong thought. They craft all of this splendor and wonder, they give us whatever we desire, then they subtly poke at us. Be a God. Prophesy. Maintain our illusion for us.

 Die. Die so that we can keep believing.

 He usually stayed off of his roof balcony. He preferred to be down below, on the greens, where everything was up close. With that perspective, it was so much easier to ignore the larger view. So much easier to focus on simple things. His life at the moment. His friends among the Returned. He could forget about where he was being shoved.

 “Your grace?” Llarimar asked quietly, standing behind him.

 Lightsong didn’t reply.

 “Are you all right, your grace?” Llarimar said.

 “No man should be this important, Scoot,” Lightsong said.

 “Your grace?” Llarimar asked, walking up beside him.

 “It does strange things to you,” Lightsong said. “We weren’t built for it.”

 “You’re a God, your grace. You were built for it.”

 “No,” he said. “I’m no God.”

 “Excuse me, but you don’t really get to choose. We worship you, and that makes you our God.”

 Lightsong stood quietly. Llarimar spoke the words in his usual calm way. Didn’t the man ever get upset? “You’re not helping my mood, any.”

 “I apologize, your grace. But, perhaps you should stop arguing about the same old things.”

 Lightsong shook his head. “This is something different, today. I’m not sure what to do.”

 “You mean about Allmother’s Commands?”

 Lightsong nodded. “I thought I had it figured out, Scoot. I’d gotten myself in too deeply. I can’t keep up with all of the things Blushweaver is plotting--I’ve never been good at details. I’m much better with personalities-- with understanding why people do, and what their eventual goals are. However, the subtleties of politics, the plots and the schemes, I don’t deal well with those.”

 Llarimar didn’t respond.

 “I was going to give it up,” Lightsong said. “Allmother was doing a fantastic job of standing up for herself. I figured, if I give her my Commands, then she’ll know what to do. She’ll understand if it’s better to support Blushweaver or not.”

 “You could still just let her,” Llarimar said. “You gave her your Commands too.”

 “I know,” Lightsong said.

 They fell silent.

 So, it comes down to this, he thought. The first of us who changes those Commands takes control of all twenty thousand. The other will be locked out.

 What did he choose? Did he sit back and let history happen, or did he jump in and make a mess of things? Why couldn’t he simply be left alone?

 Whoever you are, he thought, whatever is out there that sent me back, why couldn’t you just leave me be? I’d already lived one life. I’d already made my decisions. Probably bad ones.

 Why did you have to send me back? Couldn’t I just be done?

 He’d tried everything, and yet people still worshipped him. Actually, he knew for a fact that he was one of the most popular Returned, visited by more petitioners and given more art than almost anyone else. Only Allmother and Blushweaver got more attention.

 Honestly, he thought. What is wrong with these people?

 Were they so in need of something to worship that they chose him, rather than face the fact that they might be wrong about what they believed? He would have thought that the way he acted would have made people less likely to believe in their religion.

 Allmother claimed that they did. She worried, he could tell, about the perceived lack of faith among the common people. Lightsong wasn’t certain he agreed with her. He knew of the theories--that the Gods who lived the longest were the weak ones, because the system encouraged the best Gods to kill themselves quickly. It was a good theory in the abstract, but the numbers didn’t support it. The same number of petitioners came to him now as when he first started. Plus, too few Gods were chosen on a whole to support a theory that depended upon their numbers getting diluted over time.

 Or, was he just distracting himself with irrelevant details? He leaned on the banister, looking out over the green as glowing pavilions were erected for the Gods.

 This could be the crowning moment for him. He could finally prove that he was exactly what he had always said he was. An indolent, who avoided doing anything that resembled work. It was perfect. If he simply did nothing, then Allmother would be forced to take up the armies and resist Blushweaver.

 But was that what he wanted? Allmother kept herself secluded from the other Gods. She didn’t attend many Court meetings, and didn’t listen to the debates. Blushweaver was intricately involved. She knew every God and Goddess. She understood the issues, and Lightsong saw through her air of frivolous sensuousness. She was keen minded. Of all of the Gods, only she had begun taking steps to secure their armies, should something go wrong.

 Siri is no threat, he thought. Not yet, at least. But, if someone else were manipulating her? He still didn’t really know why she had been sent instead of her sister.

 Would Allmother have the political savvy to understand the danger there? Would she be capable of directing the surgings of popular opinion? And, without guidance, would Blushweaver see that Siri wasn’t simply crushed?

 Those things were the cost of stepping back, taking the opportunity to escape. And, if he did walk away, he wouldn’t honestly be able to say that any disasters that followed weren’t his fault. He would be to blame, for he’d given up.

 “Who was she, Llarimar?” Lightsong asked quietly. “The young woman in my dreams. Was she my wife?”

 The high priest didn’t answer.

 “I need to know,” Lightsong said, turning. “This time, I really need to know.”

 “I. . . .” Llarimar frowned, then looked away. “No,” he said quietly. “She was not your wife.”

 “My lover?”

 He shook his head.

 “But she was important to me?”

 “Very,” Llarimar said.

 “And is she still alive?”

 Llarimar paused, then nodded his head.

 Still alive, Lightsong thought.

 If this city fell, then she would be in danger. Everyone who worshiped Lightsong--everyone who counted on him despite everything he’d tried to do--would be in danger. It seemed impossible. T’Telir couldn’t fall. It was the most powerful kingdom in the world.

 And yet, there were his dreams.

 I know I’m no God, he thought. Why should I let my dreams bother me? They’re not prophesies. There’s nothing more to them than my own subconscious, frightened and worried.

 Still, could he really walk away? Let someone else take his armies and use them to protect--or perhaps doom--Hallandren?

 He had only been given one real duty in the Court. That of taking command of ten thousand Lifeless. Of deciding when they should be used. And when they should not be.

 He stood up straight, then walked back toward the steps down to his palace.

#

 The Lifeless Enclave was, technically, part of the Court of Gods. The massive building was built at the base of the Court plateau, and a long, extended walkway ran down to it--a walkway that was entirely covered, like a massive hallway filled only with steps.

 Lightsong walked down the steps with his entourage, several servants carrying lanterns. They passed several guard posts, though he wasn’t sure why they needed to post guards in a hallway leading down from the Court. Surely there was a better way to break into the Enclave.

 The soldiers let him pass without comment or objection. The Enclave was, after all, part of Lightsong’s stewardship.

 I probably should have visited here more often, he thought. Though, of course, he wasn’t certain what he would have done. Servants and scribes cared for the Lifeless, making certain their ichor-alcohol was fresh, that they exercised their muscles, and. . .did whatever else it was that Lifeless did. Lightsong wasn’t really certain. He had only visited the Enclave a few times before, all during his first few weeks as a Returned. That was when it had been his duty to give a new Command Phrase to his ten thousand Lifeless.

 Llarimar and several of the other priests were puffing by the time they reached the bottom of the steps, and he worried about how difficult it would be for them to climb back up. Lightsong, of course, was in perfect physical condition. He always was. There were some things about Godhood that never made him complain.

 A couple of guards opened the doors into the compound. It was massive, of course--it contained space for forty thousand Lifeless. However, they needed far less room than regular people. As he understood it, the complex really only contained a few different rooms. Four large warehouse-like storage areas for the four different groups of Lifeless. A track for them to run about and keep themselves healthy. A room filled with various stones and blocks of metal for them to lift to keep their muscles strong. And the medical area, where their ichor-alcohol was tested and administered.

 Llarimar, who knew much more about the place, led him to the proper warehouse room. They passed through several twisting passages, then approached a guard post set beside a large open doorway. Lightsong passed the guard post, which was populated with human guards, and looked into the warehouse room.

 He’d forgotten that they kept the Lifeless in the dark.

 “Here we are, your grace,” Llarimar said, waving a couple of priests forward to hold up lanterns. The door opened onto a viewing platform. The floor of the warehouse extended below, filled with line upon line of silent, waiting Lifeless. They wore their armor and carried their weapons, ready should they be needed.

 “There are holes in the ranks,” Lightsong said.

 “Some of them will be exercising,” Llarimar replied. “I have sent a servant to fetch them.”

 Lightsong nodded, quietly studying the ranks. They stood, with eyes open, in perfect lines. They didn’t shuffle or cough, like living men might. Staring out over them, he suddenly remembered why he had never felt any desire to return and inspect his troops. They were simply too unnerving.

 “Everyone out,” Lightsong said.

 Llarimar paused. “Your grace? Don’t you want a few priests to stay?”

 Lightsong shook his head. “No. I will bear this phrase myself.”

 Llarimar paused, but then nodded, doing as ordered.

 In Lightsong’s opinion, there was no good way of using Command Phrases. Leaving them in the hands of a single God only was to risk losing the Command Phrase through assassination or unexpected death. However, the more people who knew the Command Phrases, the more likely it was that the secret would be bribed, or tortured, out of someone.

 The only mitigating factor in the equation was the God King. Apparently, with his powerful BioChroma, he could Break Lifeless more quickly. Still, Breaking ten thousand Lifeless was a process that could take weeks, even for the God King.

 So, the choice was left to the individual Returned. They could choose to let some of their priests hear the Command Phrase, if they wished. Then, if something happened to the God, the priests could pass the Command Phrase on to the next Returned.

 If the God chose not to give the Command Phrase to his priests, then he was placing an even larger burden on himself. Lightsong hadn’t taken this route many years before, instead choosing to give the phrase to his priests--though, of course, not letting them have the right to use it.

 This time, however, he gave the phrase alone. Should he get the chance, he would whisper the Command Phrase to the God King. Until then, however, he intended to hold these Lifeless himself.

 “Bottom line blue,” he said. “I give you a new Command Phrase.” He paused. “Red Panther. Red Panther. Step to the right side of the room.”

 A group of the Lifeless near the front of the crowd moved over to the side. Those were the ones who had heard his Command. He sighed, closing his eyes. A part of him had hoped that Allmother had come here first, that she had already changed the Command Phrase.

 But she hadn’t. He opened his eyes, then took the steps down to the warehouse floor. He spoke again, changing the phrase for another group. Then, he moved on. He could do about twenty or thirty at a time--he remembered the process taking hours the last time he’d done it.

 However, he continued. He would leave the Lifeless with their basic instructions, to obey the servants when they asked the creatures to exercise or go to the infirmary. He’d give them a lesser command that could be used to move them about and make them march to specific locations, like when they had been placed in ranks outside the city to greet Siri. Another to make them go with members of the City Watch, if they required a little extra muscle.

 Yet, despite all of the uses, there would only be one person with ultimate command of the creatures. One person who could make them do anything he wanted. The one with the Command Phrase. And, when he was done in this room, he would move on, taking utter command of Allmother’s ten thousand as well.

 He would draw both armies to him. And, in doing so, he would take his place at the very middle of the fate of two kingdoms.

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-eight

 Susebron didn’t leave in the mornings anymore.

 Siri lay in the bed beside him, curled slightly, her skin against his. He slept peacefully, chest going up and down, white bed sheets throwing out prismatic colors around him as they inevitably reacted to his presence.

 Who could have known? Just a few months back, who could have understood where she’d find herself? Not only married to the God King of Hallandren, but in love with him as well.

 Part of her still thought it amazing. He was the most important religious and secular figure in the whole of the inner sea area. He was the basis for orthodox worship of the Hallandren Iridescent Tones. He was a creature feared and hated by most people in Idris.

 And he was dozing quietly at her side. A God of color and beauty, his body as perfectly sculpted as the statues that stood throughout T’Telir. And what was Siri? Not perfect, of that she was sure. And yet, somehow, she’d brought something to him that he needed. A hint of spontaneity. A breath from the outside, untamed and unintimidated by his priests or his reputation.

 She sighed, head resting on his chest. Well, perhaps not completely unintimidated. There would be a price to be paid for their enjoyment of these last few nights. The last thing they needed was for her to get pregnant.

 We really are fools, she thought idly. We only had to avoid one thing: giving the priests a child. We’re pointing ourselves straight toward danger.

 But, she found it hard to berate herself too soundly for what they had done. The truth was, she suspected that her act wouldn’t have fooled the priests for much longer. They would grow suspicious, or at least frustrated, if she continued to go without producing an heir. She could see them interfering more if faced with more stalling.

 Whatever she and Susebron did, they would have to do it quickly.

 He stirred beside her, and she twisted, looking up at his face as he opened his eyes, yawning. He regarded her for a few minutes, playing with her hair. It was amazing how quickly they had become comfortable in their intimacy. Even the first night hadn’t been all that awkward.

 Eventually, he reached for his writing board. I love you, he wrote.

 She smiled. It was always the first thing he wrote in the mornings. “And I love you,” she said.

 However, he continued, we are probably in trouble, aren’t we?

 “Yes.”

 How long? he asked. Until it’s obvious that you will bear a child, I mean?

 “I’m not sure,” she said, frowning. “I don’t have much experience with these kinds of things. I know that some of the women back in Idris complained of not being able to have children as quickly as they wanted, so I think that maybe it doesn’t always happen immediately. But, I know other women who bore children almost exactly nine months after their wedding night.”

 Susebron looked thoughtful.

 A year from now, I could be a mother, Siri thought. Oddly, it was the first time such a thing had occurred to her. She found the concept a little daunting. Up until a short time ago, she hadn’t even really thought of herself as an adult.

 Of course, she thought, feeling a bit sick, according to what we’ve been told, any children I bear the God King would be stillborn anyway. And, even if the child weren’t stillborn, then it was still in danger. If her assumptions were correct, then the priests would spirit her real child away, then replace it with a child Returned. Chances were that in such a case, Siri would be made to conveniently disappear as well.

 Bluefingers tried to warn me, she thought. He spoke of danger, not only to Susebron, but to myself. He said that now matter what I did, I wasn’t to bear Susebron a child. For the safety of both of us.

 Susebron was writing.

 I’ve made a decision, he wrote.

 Siri raised an eyebrow.

 I want to try making myself known to the people, he wrote, and the other gods. I want to reveal what my priests have done to me, and take control of the kingdom for myself.

 Siri frowned. “I thought we decided that would be too dangerous.”

 It will be, he wrote. But I’m beginning to think that it is a risk we must take.

 “And your objections from before?” she asked. “You can’t exactly shout out the truth. And, your guards are likely to rush you away if you try something like escaping or writing something that is too revealing.”

 Yes, Susebron wrote, but you have far fewer guards, and you can yell.

 Siri paused. “Yes,” she said. “But would anyone believe me? Wouldn’t they think me mad if I just started screaming about how the God King is being held prisoner by his own priests?”

 Susebron cocked his head. I really don’t have much experience in things like this. . . .

 “Trust me,” she said. “They’d think that I was crazy.”

 What if you gained the confidence of the Returned you often speak about, he wrote. Lightsong the Bold.

 Siri paused.

 You could go to him, Susebron wrote. Tell him the truth, and begin building support for me. Perhaps he will lead you to other Returned he thinks might listen. The priests will not be able to silence us all.

 Siri lay beside him for a moment, head still resting on his chest. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “It sounds possible, Seb, but it just seems so foolhardy. Why not just run? My serving women are from Pahn Kahl now. Bluefingers has said that he will try to get us out, if I ask. We can flee to Idris.”

 Susebron was motionless for a moment. Then, he slowly erased his board and wrote. If we flee, Hallandren troops will follow, Siri. We would not be safe in Idris.

 “We could go somewhere else, then.”

 He shook his head. I have been listening to the arguments in the court of judgement. There will soon be war between our kingdoms. My armies will march against those of your father. If we run, we will be abandoning Idris to invasion.

 “The invasion will happen if we stay, too.”

 Not if I take control of my throne, Susebron wrote. The people of Hallandren, even the Gods, are bound and obligated to obey my will. There will be no war if they know I disapprove.

 He paused, then shook his head again, writing faster. I have told the priests that I do not wish my people to go to war, and they have appeared sympathetic. However, they have done nothing.

 “They are probably worried,” Siri said. “Worried that if they let you start making policy, then you may begin to think that you don’t need them.”

 They are right to be worried, he wrote, smiling. I need to become the real leader of my people, Siri. That is the only way to protect your beautiful hills and the family you love so much.

 Siri fell silent, offering no further objections. Still, her heart began to beat uncomfortably quick. To do as he was saying would be to play their hand. Make a gamble for everything. If they failed, the priests would undoubtedly figure out that Siri and Susebron were in communication. That would spell the end of their time alone together.

 Susebron obviously noticed her concern. It is dangerous, I know. But it is the best option. Fleeing would be just as risky, and it would leave us in far worse circumstances. In Idris, we would be seen as the reason the Hallandren armies had come. And, do you really think that we could survive in another country?

 Siri slowly shook her head. No, they couldn’t. They’d have no money, and would make perfect subjects for ransom. They’d escape the priests only to find themselves being held captive by one kingdom or another to be used against Hallandren. The Kingdom of Iridescence was still widely disliked because of the Manywar.

 Beyond that, if they didn’t provide Susebron with a breath each week, he would die. That wasn’t likely to happen in Idris, and it would be uncertain for them in other countries as well.

 “All right,” Siri said. “But, if we’re really going to try this, I think we should do it sooner rather than later. If I display any signs of being pregnant, I bet it will take the priests all of ten heartbeats to sequester me away.”

 Susebron nodded. There will be a general meeting of the court in a couple of days, he wrote. I have heard my priests say that this will be an important meeting--it is rare that the gods are all called together to vote. That meeting will decided wither or not we should march on Idris.

 Siri nodded nervously. “I’ll sit with Lightsong,” she said. “And plead for his help. If we go to several of the other Gods, perhaps they--in front of the crowds--can demand to know whether or not I am lying.”

 And, if any of them get close enough, I will open my mouth and reveal that I have no tongue, he wrote. Then let us see what the priests do. They will be forced to bow before the will of their own pantheon.

 Siri nodded. “All right,” she said. “Let’s try it.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Forty-nine

 Vasher found her practicing again.

 He hovered outside the window, lowered down from the roof via an Awakened rope which gripped him about the waist. He watched as Vivenna repeatedly Awakened a strip of cloth, Commanding it to wiggle across the room, wrap around a cup, and bring that cup back without spilling.

 She’s learning so quickly, he thought. Had he picked up complex Commands so easily? The words themselves were simple to say, but giving the right mental impulse to the was difficult. It was like learning to command a second body--you had to do it instinctively.

 Even as she watched, she got it wrong. The cloth wiggled across the room, but climbed into cup instead of wrapping around it. Then, it shook, making the cup fall over. Finally, it returned, leaving a soggy trail.

 Vivenna cursed quietly and walked over to refill the cup. She never noticed Vasher hanging just outside. He wasn’t surprised--he was currently a Drab, his excess Breath stored in his shirt to let him move about without being noticed as easily.

 She replaced the cup, and he pulled himself up as she walked back, hiding from her.

 Of coruse, the mechanics of how he moved about on the ropes was far more complicated than it seemed. He had given the rope a very difficult command, making it respond to taps of his finger along its length. Once the Awakening happened, no further Command could be given. Awakening objects like ropes was different from creating a Lifeless--Lifeless had brains, and could interpret Commands and requests. The rope had none of that; it could only act on its original instructions.

 However, those original instructions could include provisions, such as how to respond when tapped. And so, he lowered himself back down a moment later, Vivenna’s back to him again as she picked up another colored swatch to use as fuel when she Awakened her cup-fetching ribbon.

 I like her, Nightblood said. I’m glad we didn’t kill her.

 Vasher didn’t respond.

 She’s very pretty, don’t you think? Nightblood asked.

 You can’t tell, Vasher replied.

 I can tell, Nightblood said. I’ve decided that I can.

 Vasher just shook his head. Pretty or not, the woman should never have come to Hallandren. She’d given Denth a perfect tool.

 Of course, he admitted wryly, Denth probably didn’t need that tool. Hallandren and Idris were close to snapping anyway. Vasher had stayed away too long. He knew that. He also knew that there was no way he would have come back earlier. He had too many memories in this city.

 Inside the room, Vivenna successfully managed to get the cloth to bring her cup, and she drank from it with a satisfied look that Vasher could just barely see from the side. He shook his head, then had the rope lower him all the way to the ground. He ordered it to let go up above, then--once it had twisted down around his arm--he recovered his breath climbed the external steps to the room up above.

#

 Vivenna turned as Vasher entered. She sat down the cup, hurriedly stuffing the cloth in her pocket.

 What does it matter if he sees me practicing? she thought, flushing slightly. It’s not like I have anything to hide.

 Still, practicing before him made her feel embarrassed. He was so stern, so unforgiving of faults. She didn’t like him seeing her fail.

 “Well?” she asked as he set Nightblood against the far wall.

 He shook his head. “Both the house you were using and the safehouse in the slums are empty,” he said. “Denth is too clever to get caught like that. He must have figured that you would compromise his location.”

 Vivenna ground her teeth in frustration, sitting back against the wall. Like the other rooms they had stayed in, this one was simple. Their only possessions were a pair of bedrolls and their changes of clothing, all of which Vasher carried about in his pack.

 Denth lived far more luxuriously. Of course, he could afford to--he now held all of Lemks’ money. Clever bit, that, she thought. Giving me charge over the money, making me feel like I was in charge. He knew all along that the money was never out of his hands, just like I never was.

 “I was hoping we’d be able to watch him,” she said out loud. “Maybe get a jump on what he’s planning next.”

 Vasher shrugged. “Didn’t work,” he said. “No use crying about it. Come on. I think I can get us in to meet with some of the Idrian workers at one of the orchards, assuming we arrive during the lunch break.”

 Vivenna frowned as he turned to go.

 “Vasher,” she said. “We can’t keep doing this.”

 He turned, frowning. “This?”

 “When I was with Denth, we met with crime lords and politicians. People with influence. We’re meeting with peasants on corners and in fields.”

 “They’re good people,” he said, turning.

 “I know they are,” Vivenna said quickly. “But, do you really think it’s making a difference? When compared to what Denth is probably doing, I mean?”

 He frowned, but instead of arguing with her, he just pounded his fist against the side of the wall. “I know,” he said. “But this is all I can think of at the moment. I’ve been working on other leads, but the truth is that most everything I try seems a step behind Denth. I can kill the gangs of thieves he’s working with, but he always has a couple of them working on each of his plots, so I really don’t accomplish much. I’ve tried to figure out who is behind the war--even poked around in the Court of Gods a bit--but everyone is growing more and more closed-lipped. They take the war as inevitable, now, and don’t want to be seen on the losing side of the argument.”

 “What about priests?” Vivenna said. “They’re the ones who bring things to the attention of the Gods, right? If we can get more of them to argue against the war, then maybe we can stop it.”

 “Priests are a fickle lot,” Vasher said with a shake of his head. “Most of those who argued against the war have caved in. Even Fafad switched sides on me.”

 “Fafad?”

 “High priest of the Returned named Stillmark,” Vasher said. “He used to be the most outspoken opponent of the war--he even met with me a few times. Then, he switched sides and refused to see me anymore.”

 Vivenna frowned. Fafad. . . . “Vasher,” she said. “We hit one of his carriages.”

 “What?”

 “Denth and his team,” Vivenna said. “We helped a gang of thieves rob from a shop to disrupt trade in the city, and we used a couple of distractions to cover the burglary. We set a fire in a nearby building, and we overturned a carriage that was passing through the garden. It belonged to a high priest. I think his name was Fafad.”

 Vasher cursed quietly.

 “You think it might be connected?” she asked.

 “Maybe. You know which gang was actually doing the robbery?”

 She shook her head.

 “I’ll be back,” he said. “Wait here.”

#

 So, she did. She waited for hours, with no sign of Vasher. She tried practicing her Awakening some more, but she’d already spent most of the day working on that. She was tired, mentally, and found it difficult to concentrate.

 Eventually, she found herself staring out the window in annoyance. Denth had always let her go along on his information gathering forays.

 Of course, that was just because he wanted to keep me close, she thought. Besides, now that she looked back, there were obviously lots of things he had been hiding from her. Vasher just didn’t care to placate her.

 He wasn’t stingy with information, though, as long as she asked the right questions. His answers were often grumpy, but he did usually answer. She still mulled over their conversation about Awakening. Less because of what he’d said--most of it, from what she could tell, wasn’t actually that relevant to the practice of Awakening. More because he’d been the one to say it.

 She had to stop judging people, particularly those around her. But, was that really possible? Wasn’t interaction based, in part, on judgments? A person’s background and attitudes influenced how she responded to them. That was the way it should be, shouldn’t it?

 The balance, then, wasn’t to stop judging. It was to be careful to not hold those judgments as immutable. She couldn’t rely on them to the point that she ignored other clues. She’d judged Denth to be a friend, but she shouldn’t have ignored the way he talked about mercenaries having no friends. Or, at least, no friends they wouldn’t betray.

 The door slammed open. Vivenna jumped, putting a hand to her chest.

 Vasher walked in. “Start reaching for that sword when you’re startled,” he said. “There’s little reason to grab your shirt, unless you’re planning to rip it off.”

 Vivenna flushed, hair twinging red, and lowered her hand. The sword he had bought her lay on the side of the room; they hadn’t had much opportunity to practice, and she still barely even knew how to hold the thing.

 “Well?” she asked as he closed the door. Outside, it was already dark, and the city was beginning to sparkle with lights.

 “The robbery was a cover,” Vasher said. “The real hit was that carriage. Denth promised the thieves something valuable if they committed a robbery and started a fire, both as distractions to get at the carriage.”

 “Something valuable?” Vivenna asked.

 Vasher shrugged. “I’m not sure what it was.”

 “Coins?” Vivenna asked. “When Tonk Fah hit the horse, it knocked a chest off the top of the carriage. It was filled with gold.”

 “What happened then?” Vasher asked.

 She shook her head. “I left with the members of the team. I thought the carriage itself was the distraction, and once it went down, I was supposed to pull out.”

 “And Denth?”

 “He wasn’t there, come to think of it,” Vivenna said. “The others told me he was working with the thieves in the shop.”

 Vasher nodded, walking over to his pack. He pulled out the bedrolls, throwing them aside, then took out several articles of clothing. He pulled off his shirt, exposing a well-muscled--and rather hairy--torso. Vivenna blinked in surprise, then flushed. She probably should have turned aside, but the curious part of her was too strong. What was he doing?

 He didn’t remove his trousers, thankfully, but instead threw on a different shirt. The sleeves of this one were cut into ribbons near the wrist, and several lengths of cloth hung down past the hands.

 “Upon call of necessity,” he said, “become my fingers, and grip that which I must.”

 The cuff tassels wiggled.

 “Wait,” Vivenna said. “What was that? A Command?”

 “Too complicated for you,” he said, kneeling and undoing the cuff of his trousers. She could see that here, too, there were extra lengths of cloth. “Become as my legs, and give them strength,” he Commanded.

 The leg-tassels crossed under his feet, growing tight. Vivenna didn’t argue with his insistence that the Commands were ‘too complicated’ for her. Instead, she just memorized them.

 Finally, Vasher threw on his tattered cloak, which was ripped in places. “Protect me,” he commanded, and she could see almost all of his remaining breath drain into the cloak. He wrapped his rope belt around his waist--it was thin, for a rope, and strong, and she knew its purpose was not to keep his trousers up.

 Finally, he picked up Nightblood. “You coming?”

 “Where?”

 “We’re going to go capture a few of those thieves,” Vasher said. “Ask them exactly what Denth wanted with that carriage.”

 Vivenna felt a stab of fear. “Why invite me? Won’t I just make it harder for you?”

 “Depends,” he said. “If we get into a fight, and you get in the way, then it will be more difficult. However, if we get into a fight and half of them attack you instead of me, it will make things more easy.”

 “Assuming you don’t defend me,” Vivenna said.

 “That’s a good assumption,” he said, looking into her eyes. “If you want to come, come. But don’t expect me to protect you, and--whatever you do--don’t try and follow on your own.”

 “I wouldn’t do such a thing,” she said.

 He shrugged. “I thought I’d make the offer. You’re no prisoner here, princess. You can do whatever you want. I’d just rather you didn’t get in my way when you do it, understand?”

 “I understand,” she said, feeling a chill as she made her decision. “And I’m coming.”

 He didn’t try to dissuade her. He simply pointed at her sword. “Keep that on.”

 She nodded, tying it on.

 “Draw it,” he said.

 She did so, and he corrected her grip. “Hold it like that.”

 “What good will holding it properly do?” she asked. “I still don’t know how to use it.”

 “Look threatening, and it might make someone attacking you pause. If they’re the men who decided to attack you, instead of me, ten they’re likely to be the ones less confident in their ability to duel. A couple second pause could mean a lot, in a fight.”

 She nodded nervously, sliding the weapon back in its sheath. Then, she grabbed several lengths of rope. “Hold when thrown,” she said to the smaller one, then stuffed it into her pocket.

 Denth eyed her.

 “Better to lose the Breath than get killed,” she said.

 “Few Awakeners agree with you,” he noted. “To most of them, the thought of losing Breath is far more frightening than the prospect of death.”

 “Well, I’m not like most Awakeners,” she said. Part of me still finds the process blasphemous.

 He nodded. “Put the rest of your Breath somewhere else,” he said, opening the door. “We can’t afford to draw attention.”

 She grimaced, then did as told, putting her Breath into her shirt with a basic, and non-active, Command. “My Breath to yours,” she said, hand on her sleeve.

 The dullness returned. Everything seemed. . .dead around her.

 “Let’s go,” Denth said, moving out into the darkness.

 Night in T’Telir was very different from her homeland. There, it had been possible to see so many stars overhead that it looked like a bucket of white sand had been sprayed into the air.

 In T’Telir, there were street lamps in the richer segments of town, cared for each night by lamplighters. Beyond that, there were taverns, restaurants, and other houses of entertainment, all with lights lit. With the inner sea so close, oil was cheaper than it was in the mountains, and even a lot of the middle class could afford it.

 The result was a city full of lights--a little like the stars themselves had come down to inspect grand T’Telir. At first, Vivenna had been surprised at how few stars she could see in the sky here, and had attributed it to the lower altitude. However, she was beginning to suspect that it was the light.

 Of course, that didn’t mean that the places they were going were--by any means--bright. Vasher led her through the streets, his presence making her a less nervous, though he quickly became little more than a hulking shadow. They left behind places with street lights, and even lit windows, moving into the slums.

 She wasn’t familiar with this partuclar slum. It was one of those she’d been afraid to enter, even when living on the streets. The night seemed to grow even darker as they entered, walking down one of the twisting, dark roads that passed for streets in such places. They walked in silence. Vivenna knew not to speak and draw attention.

 Eventually, Vasher pulled to a stop. He pointed toward a building a short distance away. Single story, flat-topped, and rather wide. It sat somewhat alone, in a depression, shanties built from refuse covering the ground running up the slight hill behind it.

 Vasher waved for her to stay back, then quietly put the rest of his Breath into a rope. Or, that was what she assumed he was doing. Without her Breath, she couldn’t feel his presence anyway. He crept forward in the night.

 Vivenna waited, nervous, kneeling beside a decaying shanty that looked to have been built from half-crumbling bricks stolen from some other fallen structure.

 Why did I come? She thought. He didn’t tell me to--he simply said that I could, if I wanted. I could just as easily have stayed behind.

 But she was tired of having things happen to her. Things out of her control. She had been the one to point out that maybe there was a connection between the priest Fafen and Denth’s plan. She wanted to see this to the end.

 That had been easy to think back in the lit room. Here in the darkness she was far less certain. It didn’t help that, looming to the left side of the shanty, stood one of the D’Denir statues. There had been some of them in the Highland slums as well, though most of them had been defaced or broken.

 A footstep cracked, and a shadow loomed. She nearly gasped in shock, but managed to keep it in as she recognized Nightblood in the figure’s hand.

 “Two guards,” Vasher said. “Both silenced.”

 “Can we question them?”

 He shook a silhouetted head. “Practically kids, both of them. We need someone more important. We’ll have to go in. Either that, or sit and watch the place for a few days to determine who is in charge, then grab him when he’s alone.”

 “That would take too long,” Vivenna whispered.

 “I agree,” he said. “I can’t use the sword, though. When Nightblood is through with a group, there’s never anyone to question.”

 Vivenna shivered.

 “Come on,” he whispered, then turned back toward the building. She followed as quietly as she could. As she moved for the front door, however, Vasher grabbed her arm and shook his head. She followed him around to the side, barely noticing the two lumps of unconscious bodies stuffed into a ditch.

 At the back of the building, Vasher began to feel around on the ground. After a few moments without success, he cursed quietly and pulled something from his pocket. A handful of straw.

 In just a few seconds, he had constructed three little men out of the straw, using Breath reclaimed from his cloak to give them life. He gave each one the command “Find Tunnels.”

 Vivenna watched with fascination. That’s far more abstract a Command than he led me to believe was possible, she thought as the little men scuttled around on the ground. Vasher himself returned to his searching. But. . .it seems that experience--and ability to use mental images--is the most important aspect of Awakening.

 He’s been doing this a long time. And, the way he spoke before--like a scholar--indicates he’s studied Awakening very seriously.

 One of the straw men began to jump up and down. The other two rushed over to it, and then they began to bounce as well. Vasher joined them, as did Vivenna, and she watched as he uncovered a trap door hidden with a thick layer of dirt on it. As he raised it a tad, then reached underneath. His hand came back out with several small bells, which had apparently been rigged there to ring if the door were opened all the way.

 “No group like this has a hideout without bolt holes,” Vasher said. “Usually a couple of them. Always trapped.”

 Vivenna watched as he recovered the Breath from the straw men, quietly apologizing to each one as he did so. She frowned at the curious words. They were just piles of straw. Why apologize?

 He put the Breath back into his cloak with a protection Command, then led the way down through the trap door. Vivenna followed, stepping softly, skipping a particular step when Vasher indicated. At the bottom was a cellar-like tunnel--or, so she got from feeling along the sides of the earthen chamber. There was very little light.

 Vasher moved forward, though in the blackness, she could only tell because of his rustling clothing. She followed blindly, stepping very carefully, and was curious to see light ahead. She could also hear voices. Men talking, and laughing.

 She could see Vasher’s silhouette, and she moved up next to him, peeking into an earthen room. There was a fire burning at the center, the smoke twisting up through a hole in the ceiling. The upper chamber--the building itself--was probably just a front, or a way to delay people who might raid, for the chamber down here looked very lived-in. There were piles of cloth, bed rolls, pots and pans. All of it as dirty as the men who sat around the fire, laughing.

 Vasher gestured to the side. There was another tunnel. Vivenna’s heart jumped in shock as Vasher crept into the room and toward the tunnel. She glanced back at the fire. The men were very focused on their drinking, and blinded by the light of their fire. They didn’t seem to notice Vasher.

 She took a deep breath, then followed, feeling exposed with the firelight to her back. Vasher didn’t go very far, however, before pausing. Vivenna nearly collided with him.

 He stood there for a few moments, and finally Vivenna poked him in the back, trying to get him to move aside so that she could see what he was doing. He moved a bit to the side, and she could finally see what he had.

 This tunnel ended abruptly--apparently, it was less of a tunnel, and more of a nook. And, nestled against the back of the nook was a cage, about as tall as Vivenna’s waist. Inside the cage was a child.

 Vivenna gasped softly, kneeling down beside the cage. The valuable thing Denth said was in the carriage, she thought, making the connection. It wasn’t the coins. It was the priest’s daughter. The perfect bargaining chip if you wanted to blackmail someone into doing as you wished.

 As Vivenna knelt, the girl pulled back in the cage, sniffling quietly and quivering. The cage stank of human waste, and the child was covered in grime. All except for her cheeks, which had been washed clean by tears.

 Vivenna looked up at Vasher. His eyes were shadowed, his back to the fire, but she could see him gritting his teeth. She could see tension in his muscles. He turned his head to the side, half-lighting his face by the illumination of the red fire. And in that single lit eye, she saw fury.

 “Hey!” one of the thieves called.

 “Get the child out,” Vasher said in a harsh whisper.

 “How did you get here!” another man yelled.

 Vasher met her eyes with his single illuminated one, and she felt herself shrink before him. She nodded, and Vasher turned away from her, one hand clenching into a fist, the other grabbing Nightblood in a hard-knuckled grip. He stepped slowly, deliberately, as he approached the men, his cloak rustling. Vivenna intended to do as asked, but she found it hard too look away from him. Walking quietly toward the fire, each step deliberate.

 Men drew blades. Vasher stepped up to them. Then moved.

 Nightblood, still sheathed, took one man in the chest, and Vivenna heard bones snap. Another man attacked, and Vasher spun, whipping out a hand. The tassels on his sleeve moved on their own, wrapping around the blade of the sword, catching it. Vasher’s momentum ripped the blade free, and he tossed it aside, the tassels releasing it.

 The sword hit the dirt of the cellar floor, and Vasher’s hand snapped up, grabbing the thief by he face. The tassels wrapped like foot-long, too-limber fingers around the man’s head, latching on like a squid’s tentacles.

 Vasher slammed then man down into the ground--kneeling to give momentum--even as he rammed the sheathed Nightblood into another man’s legs, dropping him. A third tried to cut Vasher from behind, and Vivenna cried a warning. Vasher’s cloak, however, suddenly whipped out--moving on its own--and grabbed the surprised man by the arms.

 Vasher turned, anger in his face, and swung Nightblood around toward the captured man. Vivenna cringed at the sound of the cracking bones and screaming, and she turned away from the fight. With shaking fingers, she tried to open the cage.

 It was locked, of course. She drew out some Breath from a rope, then tried to Awaken the lock, but nothing happened.

 Metal, she thought. Of course. It hasn’t been alive, so it can’t be Awakened.

 So, instead, she pulled a thread free from one of the ropes. She eyed it, trying to ignore the screams from behind. Vasher began to bellow as he fought, losing any semblance of being a cold killer. This was a man enraged.

 She raised the thread.

 “Unlock things,” she Commanded.

 The thread wiggled a bit, but when she stuck it into the lock, nothing happened.

 She withdrew the Breath, took a few calming breaths of her own, then closed her eyes.

 Have to get the intention right. Need it to go inside, twist the tumbler free.

 “Twist things,” she said instead, feeling the Breath leave her. She stuck the thread into the lock. It spun about, and she heard a click.

 The door opened. The sounds of fighting from behind stopped, though men continued to moan.

 Vivenna recovered her Breath, then reached into the cage. The girl cringed, crying out and hiding her face.

 “I’m a friend,” Vivenna said soothingly. “Please, I’m here to help you.”

 But the girl wiggled, screaming when touched. Frustrated, Vivenna turned back toward Vasher.

 He stood beside the fire, head bowed, bodies strewn around him. He held Nightblood in one hand, sheathed tip resting back against the dirty floor.

 Vasher’s other hand was on Nightblood’s hilt. The sheath clasp was undone, and black smoke crept out, off of the blade, some pouring toward the ground, some floating up toward the ceiling. As if it couldn’t decide.

 Vasher’s arm was quivering.

 Draw. . .me. . . . a distant voice seemed to say in Vivenna’s head. Kill them. . . .

 Many of the men still twitched on the ground. Vasher began to slide the blade free. It was dark black, and it reflected the firelight.

 This isn’t good, she thought. “Vasher!” she said. “Vasher, the girl won’t come to me!”

 He paused, then glanced at her, eyes glazed over slightly.

 “You defeated them, Vasher. No need to draw the sword.”

 Yes. . .yes there is. . . .

 He blinked, then saw her. He snapped Nightblood back into place, shaking his head. He kicked a body as he passed, earning a grunt, and rushed up to the cage.

 “Colorless monsters,” he whispered, looking into the cage. He reached out his hands.

 And, oddly, the child went to him immediately, grabbing his chest and weeping. Vivenna watched with shock. Vasher picked the child up, tears in his own eyes.

 “You know her?” Vivenna asked.

 He shook his head. “I’ve met Fafen, and knew he had young children, but I never met any of them.”

 “Then how?”

 He didn’t answer. He looked back across the fallen men. “Come on,” he said. “I attacked the ones who came running down when they heard screams. But more might return.”

 He looked like he almost wished that would happen. However, he turned toward the exit tunnel, and Vivenna followed him out.

#

 They immediately moved toward one of the rich neighborhoods of T’Telir. Vasher didn’t say much as they walked, and the girl was even more unresponsive. Vivenna worried for the child’s mind. She had obviously had a rough time in the last few weeks.

 They passed from shanties, to tenements, to fine homes on tree-lined streets. As they reached the mansions, Vasher paused on the street, finally setting the girl down. “Child,” he said. “I’m going to say some words to you. I want you to repeat them. Repeat them, and mean them.”

 The girl regarded him absently, nodding slightly.

 He glanced at Vivenna. “Back away.”

 She opened her mouth to object, but thought better of it. She stepped back out of earshot.

 Vasher, however, had chosen to kneel near a lit street lamp, so she could see him well. He spoke to the little girl, and she spoke back to him.

 After opening the cage, Vivenna had taken the Breath back from the thread. She hadn’t stowed it somewhere else. And, with the awareness she had, she thought she saw something. The girl’s slight BioChromatic aura--the normal one that all people had--darkened just slightly.

 It was faint. Vivenna wasn’t even certain she’d seen it. Yet, with the First Heightening, she could have sworn she saw it.

 But, Denth told me it was all or nothing, she thought. You have to give away all the Breath you hold. And you certainly can’t give away part of a breath.

 Vasher stood, the girl climbing back into his arms. Vivenna walked up, and was surprised to hear the girl talking.

 “Where’s daddy?” she asked.

 Vasher didn’t reply.

 “I’m dirty,” the girl said, looking down. “Mommy doesn’t like it when I get dirty. The dress is dirty too.”

 Vasher began walking. Vivenna hurriedly caught up.

 “Are we going home?” the girl asked. “Where have we been? It’s late, and I shouldn’t be out.”

 She doesn’t remember, Vivenna realized. Doesn’t remember where she’s been. . .probably doesn’t remember anything of the entire experience.

 Vivenna looked again at Vasher, walking with his ragged beard, eyes staring forward, child in one arm, Nightblood in the other. He walked right up to the front of a mansion’s gates, then kicked them open. He walked toward the lit building up ahead, Vivenna following more nervously.

 A pair of guard dogs began barking. They howled and growled, getting closer. Vivenna cringed. Yet, as soon as they saw Vasher, they grew quiet, then trailed along happily, one hopping up and trying to lick his hands.

 What in the name of the Colors is going on?

 Some people were gathering at the front of the mansion, holding up lanterns, trying to see what had caused the dogs to begin barking. One saw Vasher, said something to the others, then disappeared back inside.

 By the time Vivenna and Vasher had reached the front patio, a man had appeared at the front doors. He wore a white nightgown, and was guarded by a couple of soldiers. They stepped forward to block Vasher, but the man in the nightgown rushed between them, crying out. He wept as he took the child from Vasher’s arms.

 “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

 Vivenna stood quietly, staying back, a little bit more in shadow. The dogs continued to lick Vasher’s hands, though they noticeably stayed away from Nightblood.

 The man clutched his child for a moment longer before finally surrendering her to a woman who had just arrived--the child’s mother, Vivenna assumed. She immediately cried in joy, taking the girl.

 “Do I know you, stranger?” the man said, looking back at Vasher.

 “We’ve met,” Vasher said in his quiet, gruff voice. “I asked you to argue against the war.”

 “That’s right!” the man said. “You didn’t need to encourage me. I think it’s a terrible idea. But, when they took Misel away from me. . . . I had to stay quiet about what had happened, had to change my arguments, or they said they’d kill her.”

 Vasher turned away from the men, moving to walk back down the path. “Those responsible have been punished,” he said. “Or, they soon will be. Take your child, keep her safe.” He paused, turning back. “And make certain this kingdom doesn’t send its Lifeless to a slaughter.”

 The man nodded, still weeping. “Yes, yes. Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

 Vasher continued walking. Vivenna watched the man for a moment, then rushed after Vasher. She eyed the dogs uncomfortably. “How did you make them stop barking?”

 He didn’t respond.

 She glanced back at the mansion.

 “You have redeemed yourself,” he said quietly, passing the dark gates.

 Vivenna turned back to him. “What?”

 “Kidnapping that girl is something Denth would have done, even if you hadn’t come to T’Telir,” Vasher said. “I don’t know that I would ever have found her. Denth worked with too many different groups of thieves, and I thought that burglary was simply intended to disrupt supplies. Like everyone else, I ignored the carriage that tipped over.”

 He paused, then looked at Vivenna in the darkness. “You saved that girl’s life.”

 “By happenstance,” she said, flushing. She couldn’t see her hair in the dark, but she could feel it going red.

 “Regardless,” Vasher said, turning away. “Whatever harm you did by being here, you just gave it some balance.”

 Vivenna smiled, the compliment affecting her--for some reason--far more than it should have. “Thank you.”

 “I’m sorry I lost my temper,” he said. “Back in that lair. A warrior is supposed to be calm. When you duel or fight, you can’t let anger control you. Or, that’s what everyone always says. That’s why I’ve never been that good of a duelist.”

 “You did the job,” she said, “and Denth has lost another pawn.” They moved out onto the street, and as they did, she glanced up at the lit mansion. “Though,” she added, “I wish I hadn’t seen that lavish building. Doesn’t help my opinion of the Hallandren priests.”

 Vasher snorted. “Fafad’s father was one of the most wealthy merchants in the city. The son dedicated himself to serving one of the Gods out of thankfulness for their blessings.”

 Vivenna paused. “Oh.”

 Vasher shrugged in the darkness. “Your opinion is understandable. Priests are always easy to blame. They make convenient scapegoats--after all, anyone with a strong faith different from your own must either be a crazy zealot or a lying manipulator.”

 Vivenna flushed yet again.

 Vasher stopped in the street, then turned to her. “I’m. . .sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to say it that way.” He cursed, turning and walking again. “I told you I’m no good at this.”

 “It’s all right,” she said, smiling faintly. “I’m getting used to it.”

 He nodded in the darkness, seeming distracted.

 He is a good man, she thought. Or, at least, a man earnestly trying to be a good. A part of her felt foolish for making yet another judgment. Yet, as she’d decided before, she didn’t think that anyone could get by without them.

 And she judged Vasher now. Not as she’d judged Denth, who had said amusing things and given her what she’d wanted to see. She judged Vasher by what she had seen him do. Cry when he saw a child being held captive. Return that child to her father, his only reward an opportunity to make a rough plea for peace. Living with barely any money, dedicating all of his time to preventing a war.

 He was rough. He was brutal. He had a terrible temper. But, he was a good man. And, walking beside him, she felt safe for the first time in weeks.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty

 “And so, we each have twenty-thousand,” Blushweaver said, walking beside Lightsong on the stone pathway that led in a circle around the arena.

 “Yes,” Lightsong said.

 She didn’t respond immediately. Their priests, attendants, and servants followed in a herd behind, though the two Gods had refused pavilion or shade. They walked solitarily, side by side. Lightsong in gold and red. Blushweaver, for once, wearing a gown that actually covered her up.

 Amazing, how good she can look in one of those, he found himself thinking as they walked. When she takes the time to respect herself. He wasn’t certain what made him dislike her revealing outfits. Perhaps he’d been a prude in his former life.

 Or, perhaps he simply was one now. He smiled ruefully to himself. How much can I really blame on my ‘old’ self anyway? That man is dead. He wasn’t the one who got himself involved in the fate of kingdoms. The one who took solitary control of half the city’s Lifeless.

 They continued to walk. The arena was filling, and--in a rare show--it appeared that all of the Gods would be in attendance. Only Weatherlove was late, but he was often a little bit behind.

 Important evetns are coming, Lightsong thought. They have been building for months now, perhaps years. Why should I be at the center of them?

 He had worked so hard, he thought, to make himself irrelevant. And yet, so many people still seemed to have faith in him. Blushweaver wasn’t the only God who treated him as if he weren’t a fool. So many of the others nodded in respect to him as he passed their arena pavilions--though, admittedly, a few scowled at him, and not a few just ignored him.

 What a strange method of rule, he thought. Immortals who only last a decade or two. Men and women who have never seen the outside world--or, at least, who don’t remember it. And the people trust us.

 The people trust us.

 “I think we should share the Command phrases with each other, Lightsong,” Blushweaver said. “So that we each have all four, just in case.”

 He didn’t say anything.

 Eventually, she turned away from him, looking at the people in their colorful clothing, clogging the benches and seats below.

 “My, my,” Blushweaver finally said, “quite the crowd. And so few of them paying attention to me. Quite rude of them, wouldn’t you say?”

 Lightsong shrugged.

 “Oh, that’s right,” she said. “You think that ignoring me is high praise.”

 Lightsong paused, then smiled, remembering their conversation a few months back. The day this had all started. He had claimed--in his usual flippant way--that by ignoring her, he gave her the respect she deserved.

 Blushweaver looked at him, a longing in her eyes.

 “Indeed,” Lightsong said. “Or, at least, that was once my opinion. I have come to revise it.”

 Blushweaver smiled. “You have, have you?”
 “Yes, I have,” Lightsong said. “You see, to ignore you is to invite your attention--as I explained on that earlier occasion. That, in turn, allows you to act indignant, which we all know is when you are in best form.

 “And yet, the act is spoiled by intention. Only truly, sincerely ignoring you would provide compliment. I am, unfortunately, unable to ignore you in such a benevolent manner. I do apologize.”

 “Oh, I don’t know,” Blushweaver said. “You seem very good at ignoring some things. Your own divinity. General good manners. My feminine wiles.”

 “You’re hardly wily, my dear,” Lightsong said. “A wily man is a soldier who fights with a small, carefully hidden dagger. You are more like a soldier who fights with a boulder the size of three palace stones. Regardless, I do have another method of dealing with you, one that you shall likely find quite flattering.”

 “Somehow, I find myself doubting.”

 “You should show more faith in me,” he said with a flippant wave of the hand. “I am, after all, a God. And, in my divine wisdom, I have realized that the only way to truly compliment one such as you--Blushweaver--is to be far more beautiful, intelligent, and interesting than you are.”

 She snorted. “Well, then,” she noted. “I feel rather insulted by your presence.”

 “Touché,” Lightsong said.

 “Are you going to explain why you consider showing me up to the most sincere form of compliment?”

 “Of course I am going to explain it,” Lightsong said. “My dear, have you ever known me to make an inflammatorily ridiculous statement without providing some form of an equally ridiculous explanation to back it up?”

 “Of course not,” she agreed. “You are nothing if not thorough in your self-congratulatory made-up logic.”

 “I’m rather humble that way.”

 “Undoubtedly.”

 “Anyway,” Lightsong said, holding up a finger, “here is how this one goes. By being far more stunning than you are, I invite people around us to ignore you. That, in turn, invites you to act your usual charming self--throwing fits and the like--to draw the attention back to you. And that, as is explained, is where you truly shine. Therefore, the only way to make certain you receive the attention you deserve is to draw it all away from you. It really is quite a difficult task. I hope you appreciate the work I do to be so wonderful.”

 “Oh, let me assure you,” she said, “I do. In fact, I appreciate it so very much that I would like to give you a break. You can back down, if you wish. I will take the awful burden of being the most wonderful of the Gods.”

 “I couldn’t possibly let you.”

 “But if you are too wonderful, my dear, you will completely destroy your image.”

 “It’s getting a little tiresome anyway,” Lightsong said. “I’ve long sought to be the laziest of the Gods, but I’m realizing more and more that such a task is beyond me. The others are all so much more delightfully useless than I am. They just pretend to not be aware of it.”

 Blushweaver paused, obviously sensing the slight hint of bitterness in his voice. They paused on the stone walkway, Blushweaver facing him, her back to the arena floor down below.

 Lightsong feigned a smile, but the moment was dying. They couldn’t simply continue to spar, not as they had. Not amidst the weights that moved around them.

 “They aren’t as bad as you imply,” she said quietly.

 “Only a group of idiots beyond imagining would give me control of their armies.”

 “They trust you,” Blushweaver said.

 “They’re lazy,” Lightsong said. “They want others to have to make the difficult decisions for them. That’s what this system encourages, Blushweaver. We’re all locked in here, told to spend our time in idleness and pleasure. And then, we’re supposed to make decisions for the good of the country?”

 He shook his head. “We’re more afraid of the outside than we’re willing to admit. All we have are paintings and dreams. And, so, when the time comes, we try to find someone else to make decisions regarding that world out there. That’s why you and I ended up with these armies. Nobody wanted to be the one who actually sent our troops out to kill. They all want to be involved, but nobody wants to be responsible.”

 He fell silent. She looked up at him, a Goddess of perfect form. So much stronger than the others, but hiding it behind her own veil of ridiculousness.

 “I know one thing that you said is true,” she said quietly.

 “And that is?”

 “You are wonderful, Lightsong.”

 He stood there, looking into her eyes for a time. Wide, beautiful eyes.

 “You’re not going to give me your Command Phrases, are you?” she asked.

 He shook his head.

 “I brought you into this,” she said. “I knew that the others respected you. You always talk about being useless, but we all know that you’re one of the few who always goes through every picture in his gallery. The one who listens most attentively to his Petitioners.”

 “They are fools,” he said. “There is nothing in me to respect.”

 “No,” She said. “You’re the one who makes us laugh, even while you insult us. Can’t you see what that does? Can’t you see how you’ve inadvertently set yourself above everyone else? You didn’t do it intentionally, Lightsong, and that’s what makes it work so well. You act like such a fool that you’ve come around to the other side! In a city of frivolity, you’re the only one who’s shown any measure of wisdom. In my opinion, that’s why you hold the armies.”

 He didn’t reply.

 “I knew the others respected you,” she said. “But I thought that I’d be able to influence you.”

 “You can,” he said. “As you’ve said, it’s your fault that I’m involved in all of this.”

 She shook her head, still staring into his eyes. “I can’t decide which feeling for you is stronger, Lightsong. My love or my frustration.”

 He took her hand, then kissed it. “I accept them both, Blushweaver. With honor.” And with that, he turned from her, drawing his servants away as he approached his box seat. Weatherlove had arrived.

 That only left the God King and his bride. Once they were in attendance, the court would convene. Lightsong sat down, wondering where Siri was. She usually got to the arena long before it was time to begin.

 Something must have delayed her, he thought. However, he found it difficult to focus his attention on the young queen. Blushweaver still stood on the walkway where he had left her. She was watching him.

 Finally, she turned, trailed by her servants as she made her way to her own pavilion.

#

 Siri walked through the palace corridors, surrounded by her serving women in brown, a dozen worries going through her head.

 First, go to Lightsong, she told herself, going over the plan. It won’t look odd for me to sit with him--we often spend time together at these things.

 I wait for Susebron to arrive, engaging in small talk with Lightsong. Then, I ask if we can talk a bit in private--something else we’ve done before. It won’t be suspicious.

 I explain what I have discovered about the God King. I tell him about the way Susebron is being kept captive. And, I see what he does.

 Her biggest fear was that Lightsong would already know, somehow, and wouldn’t care. Could he be part of the entire conspiracy? She wasn’t sure. She trusted him as much as she trusted anyone in the city except Susebron, but the nerves inside of her had a way of making her question everything and everyone.

 She passed through room after room, each one of black stone draped in a theme of colors. She almost didn’t notice how bright those were anymore.

 Assuming Lightsong agrees to help, she thought, I wait for intermission. Once the priests step off the sand, Lightsong goes and speaks with several other Gods. They each go to their priests, and instruct them to begin a discussion in the arena about whether the God King is capable of even responding to debates. They force the God King’s own priests to let him speak in his defense.

 She didn’t like trusting the priests of the other Gods. But, this did seem like the best way. The priests already had a method of addressing the populace, and once the question was raised, everyone in the arena would have it in their minds.

 And, if the priests didn’t do as instructed, Lightsong and the others would realize that they were being undermined by their own servants. At the very least, Susebron and she wouldn’t be alone. At best, the Gods would demand help from the people.

 Either way, Siri realized she was getting into very dangerous territory.

 I started in dangerous territory, she told herself firmly, leaving the rooms of the palace and entering the dark outer hallway. The man I love is threatened with death, and any children I bear will be taken from me.

 She either had to act, or sit around and let the priests continue to push her about. Susebron and she were in agreement. The best plan was to try to gain help from outside the palace. That meant she--

 Siri paused. Up ahead, at the end of the hallway, a small group of priests stood with several Lifeless soldiers. They were silhouetted by the evening light outside. Siri slowed. Something about the situation bothered her.

 The priests turned toward her and pointed.

 Colors! Siri thought, turning to flee. Another group of priests was approaching up the back hallway. No! Not now. Not when we were about to try!

 The priests up ahead noticed her, and the two groups closed. Siri considered running, but where? The thought of dashing away in her long dress--pushing through servants and Lifeless--seemed ridiculous to her.

 So, she raised her chin--eying the priests with a flat stare--and kept her hair completely under control. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, eying the priest with the most intricate head-dress.

 “We’re terribly sorry, Vessel,” he said. “But it has been decided that you shouldn’t be exerting yourself, while in your condition.”

 “My condition?” Siri asked icily. “What foolishness is this?”

 “The child, Vessel,” the priest said. “We can’t risk danger to it. There are many who would try to harm you, should they know what you are carrying.”

 Siri froze. Child? She thought with shock. How could they know that Susebron and I have actually started. . . .

 But no. She hadn’t felt anything. She would know, she was sure. There was no child.

 However, she’d supposedly been sleeping with the God King for months now. The regular people--even the priests--didn’t know that they hadn’t been intimate until recently. That was just enough time for a pregnancy to be discovered. It would sound plausible to the people of the city.

 Fool! She thought to herself in a sudden panic. Assuming they’ve already found their replacement God King, I don’t actually need to bear them a child. They just have to make everyone think I was pregnant! It would be better if they could show off a pregnant queen as proff, but their word will probably be enough.

 “There is no child,” she said. “You were just waiting--you just had to stall until you had an excuse to lock me away.”

 “Please, Vessel,” one of the priests said, gesturing for a Lifeless to take her arm. She didn’t struggle, though she did force herself to remain calm, staring the main priest in the eyes.

 He looked away. “This will be for the best,” he said. “It’s for your own good.”

 “I’m sure it is,” she said coldly, but allowed herself to be led back to her rooms.

#

 Vivenna sat among the crowds, watching and waiting. Part of her felt foolish at coming out into the open so flagrantly. However, that part of her--the cautious princess raised in Idris--was growing more and more quiet.

 Why shouldn’t she come out? Denth’s people had found her when she’d been hiding in the slums. She’d probably be safer in the crowds than she ever was hiding in alleyway.

 Besides, there were so many people in attendance at the court, she found it a little hard to believe that anyone would be able to spot her. Particularly considering how well she blended in.

 She hadn’t realized how natural it could feel to sit in trousers and a tunic, colored brightly, yet completely ignored. When she’d worn the dresses, she’d felt like everyone was staring at her. And, perhaps they had been. Now, however, she was ignored, even by those close to her.

 Vasher appeared at the railing above the benches, and nodded to her. She carefully slipped out of her seat--someone else took it immediately--and walked up to join him. Down below, the priests had already begun their arguments. Fafad, his daughter restored to him, had begun the discussion by announcing his changed mind. He currently was leading the discussion against war.

 He had very little support.

 Vivenna joined Vasher beside the railing, and he quite unapologetically elbowed some room out for her. He didn’t carry Nightblood--at her insistence, he had left the sword behind with her own dueling blade.

 “Well?” she asked quietly.

 He shook his head. “If Denth is here, I couldn’t find him.”

 “No surprise, considering that crowd,” Vivenna said. Though there were bodies all around them--many lining the railing around them--there was enough talk that a whispered conversation would be inaudible to outside ears.

 “Where did they all come from?” Vivenna asked. “This is far more busy than the other court sessions I’ve attended.”

 He shrugged. “People who are given a one time visit to the court can hold their token of entry until they want to use it. A lot of them wait until a general court session, rather than one of the smaller meetings. That way, more of the Gods are likely to be here.”

 Vivenna turned back to look over the crowd. She suspected it also had to do with the rumors she’d heard in the city. People seemed to think that this session would be the one where the Pantheon of Returned finally declared war on Idris.

 “Fafad argues well,” she said. She was having trouble hearing him because of the crowds--the Returned apparently all had messengers relaying transcripts of the arguments down below. She wondered why someone just didn’t order all the people to be quiet so that the Gods could hear. However, that didn’t seem to be the Hallandren way. They liked chaos. Or, at least, they liked the opportunity to sit and chat about things while important events were occuring.

 “Fafad is being ignored,” Vasher said, watching the priests. “He’s changed his mind twice now on the same issue. He lacks credibility.”

 “He should explain why he changed his mind, then,” Vivenna said.

 Vasher shook his head. “Maybe. However, anything that seems threatening--like kidnappings--could actually hurt his position. It would make people more worried and afraid. And then, there’s that stubborn Hallandren pride. Priests are the worst. Mentioning that his daughter had been kidnapped, and that he had been pressured into changing his political leanings. . . .”

 “I thought you liked the priests,” she said, frowning.

 “Some of them,” he said. “Not others.” When he said that, he eyed the God King’s pedestal. Susebron had yet to arrive at the court, and they had apparently started without him.

 Siri wasn’t there either. That annoyed Vivenna, since she’d been anticipating checking in on the girl, if only from a distance.

 Vasher looked back at the floor of the arena, leaning on the railing, looking anxious.

 “What?” she asked.

 He shrugged.

 She rolled her eyes. “Tell me.”

 “I just don’t like leaving Nightblood alone for too long,” he said. “I like keeping an eye on the sword.”

 “What’s it going to do?” Vivenna asked. “We locked it in the closet.”

 He shrugged again.

 “Honestly,” she said. “You would think that you’d realize that bringing a five foot long black sword to a meeting like this would be a little conspicuous. It doesn’t help, mind you, that said sword bleeds smoke and can talk in people’s minds.”

 “I don’t mind being conspicuous.”

 “I do,” she replied. “I’m not exactly eager for Denth to find me again.”

 Vasher grimaced, and she thought he’d argue some more, but he finally just nodded. “You’re right, of course,” he said. “I’ve just never been all that good at sneaking. Denth used to make fun of me for that too.”

 Vivenna frowned. “You were friends, then?”

 Vasher paused, then turned away and fell silent.

 Great, she thought. One of these days, someone in this Colors-cursed city is going to tell me the whole truth. I’ll probably die of shock.

 “I’m going to go see why the God King is taking so long,” Vasher said, leaving the railing. “I’ll be back.”

 She nodded, and he was gone. She leaned down, partially wishing she hadn’t relinquished her seat. However, she did enjoy standing, as it let her look out over the crowd.

 She would have thought that she’d be feeling stifled by the large group of people, with their shifting bodies and chattering voices. However, she’d grown used to the busy market streets, and so being surrounded by people wasn’t as intimidating to her as it once had been.

 And, in addition, there was something else. The force of BioChroma within her. She’d put some of it into her shirt, as to not draw attention, but she’d left a great portion of it. After all, she needed to be of at least the First Heightening to pass the gates into the Court without being questioned.

 That sense let her feel the life around her. Feel it like a regular person felt the air. It was always there, cool against her skin, and now the people were always there. She knew when they were looking at her. She knew when they were near.

 And, having so many of them in close proximity left her feeling just a little bit intoxicated. So much life, so many hopes and desires. So much Breath, surrounding her, buoying her up. She closed her eyes, enjoying it, listening to the arguments of the priests down below rise over the crowd.

 She felt Vasher approach before he arrived. Not only did he have a lot of Breath, but he was watching her. And, she felt a slight familiarity to those eyes. She turned, picking him out of the crowd. He actually stood out far more than she did, in his darker, ragged clothing.

 “Congratulations,” he said as he approached, taking her arm.

 “Why?”

 “You’ll soon be an aunt.”

 “What are you. . . .” she trailed off as she understood his implication. “You mean?”

 “Your sister is pregnant,” he said. “That’s why she’s not here. The priests are going to make an announcement later this evening. The God King is apparently remaining back in his palace to celebrate.”

 Vivenna stood still, stunned. Siri. Pregnant. Siri was still a little girl in Vivenna’s mind, though she had grown to be a young woman years ago.

 The concept was very difficult for her handle. Siri. Bearing the child of that thing in the palace. And yet, wasn’t Vivenna now fighting to keep that thing on his throne?

 No, she thought. I haven’t forgiven Hallandren. I just realize now that if Idris goes to war, it will be destroyed.

 The Hallandrens still have a lot to answer for. This is just one more thing.

 “We have to get her out,” Vivenna found herself saying. “Vasher, if this city does go to war--and we can’t stop it--I want you to help me get her out. Please.”

 He remained quiet.

 “Please, Vasher,” she whispered. “She’s my sister. If your hunch is right, then the God King himself is trying to start this conflict. Siri won’t be safe with him. You think it’s coincidence that he waited until right after a nice hostage arrived to begin the invasion?”

 “All right,” Vasher said. “I will do what I can.”
 Vivenna nodded, turning back to the center of the arena. The priests were withdrawing. “Where are they going?”

 “To their Gods,” Lightsong said. “To seek the will of the Pantheon.”

 “About the war?” Vivenna asked, feeling a chill.

 Vasher nodded.

#

 Lightsong waited beneath his canopy, a couple of serving men fanning him against the heat, a cup of chilled juice in his hand, lavish snacks spread out and ignored on plates to his side.

 Blushweaver brought me into this, he thought. Because she was worried that Hallandren would be taken by surprise.

 He glanced to the sides. The priests were consulting with their Gods. He could see several of them kneeling before Returned, heads bowed, seeking direction. It was the way that government happened in Hallandren.

 The priests argued their opinions, then they went and sought the will of the Gods. That would become the will of the Pantheon. That would become the will of Hallandren itself. Only the God King could veto an action of the Pantheon.

 And he had chosen not to attend this meeting.

 So self-congratulatory on spawning a child that he couldn’t even bother to see to the future of his kingdom? Lightsong thought with annoyance as Llarimar approached the tent, after having been down below with the other priests.

 Like usual, Llarimar had offered no arguments in the discussion. He tended to keep his thoughts to himself.

 The God King should have been there to make his opinion known. But, Lightsong knew that he was just looking for someone to take the burden from him. The God King rarely interfered in events--it hadn’t happened in decades, as far as Lightsong knew. The governing of the kingdom was a duty for lesser Gods.

 Llarimar knelt before him. “Please, give me your will, Lightsong my God.”

 Lightsong didn’t respond. He looked up, across the open arena to where Blushweaver’s canopy stood, verdant in the dimming evening light.

 “Oh, God,” Llarimar said. “Please. Give me the knowledge I seek. Should we go to war with our kinsmen, the Idris? Are they rebels who need to be quelled?”

 Priests were already returning from their prayers. They held aloft flags, indicating the will of their God or Goddess. Green for a favorable response to the question. Red for dissatisfaction with the petition. In this case green meant war. It felt wrong to Lightsong.

 So far, five of the returning seven flags flew green.

 “Your Excellency?” Llarimar asked, looking up.

 Lightsong stood up.

 They vote, but what good are their votes? he thought, walking out of his canopy. They hold no authority. Only two votes really matter.

 More green. Flags flapped as priests ran down the walkways. The arena was abuzz with talking people. They knew what was happening. They could see the inevitable.

 To the side, Lightsong could see Llarimar following him. The man must be frustrated. Why didn’t he ever show it? He deserved a better God.

 Lightsong approached Blushweaver’s canopy. Almost all of the priests had gotten their answers, and the vast majority of them carried flags of green. Blushweaver’s high priestess knelt before her still. Apparently, no answer had been given--though, in Lightsong’s estimation, this was just because Blushweaver wanted to wait upon the drama of the moment.

 Lightsong stopped outside of the canopy. Blushweaver waited inside, reclining, watching him with calm eyes, though he could sense her anxiety. He knew her too well.

 “Are you going to make your will known?” she asked.

 He looked down at the center of the arena. “If I resist,” he said, “this declaration will be for naught. The Gods can yell war until they are blue, but I control the armies. If I don’t give leave for the Lifeless to be used in this conflict, then Hallandren will not win.”

 Blushweaver stared at him. “You would defy the will of the Pantheon?”

 “It is my right to do so,” he said. “Just as it any of them have the same right.”

 “But you have the Lifeless.”

 “That doesn’t mean I have to do what I’m told.”

 There was a moment of silence, then Blushweaver waved to her priestess. The woman stood, then raised a flag of green and ran down to join the others. This caused a spark of conversation in the arena, a roar of voices. They must know that Blushweaver’s political wranglings had left her in a position of power over the armies. Not bad, for a person who had started without command of a single soldier.

 She’s right to be worried, he thought. And, she’s been very clever. With her control of that many troops, she’ll be an integral part of the planning, diplomacy, and execution of the war. Blushweaver could come out of this as one of the most important Returned in the history of the kingdom.

 And so could I.

 “I need to think about this some more,” Lightsong said, turning to go.

 “What?” Blushweaver demanded. “You’re not going to give a vote?”

 Lightsong shook his head.

 “Lightsong!” she said as he left. “Lightsong, you can’t leave us hanging like this!”

 He shrugged, glancing back. “Actually, I can.” He smiled. “I’m frustrating like that.”

 And, with that, he left the arena, heading back to his palace.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-one

 I’m glad you came back for me, Nightblood said. It was very lonely in that closet.

 Vasher didn’t reply as he walked across the top of the wall surrounding the Court of Gods. It was late, dark, and quiet, though a few of the palaces still shone with light. One of those belonged to Lightsong the Bold.

 I don’t like the darkness, Nightblood said.

 “You mean darkness like it is now?” Vasher asked.

 No. In the closet.

 “You can’t even see.”

 A person knows when they’re in darkness, Nightblood said. Even when they can’t see.

 Vasher wasn’t certain how to respond to that. He paused atop the wall, overlooking Lightsong’s palace. Red and gold. Courageous colors. That was probably the idea.

 You shouldn’t ignore me, Nightblood said. I don’t like it.

 Vasher knelt down, studying the palace. He’d never met the one called Lightsong, but he had heard rumors. The most flagrant of the Gods, the most condescending and mocking. And this was the person who held the fate of two kingdoms in his hands.

 There was an easy way to influence that fate.

 We’re going to kill him, aren’t we? Nightblood said, eagerness sounding in his voice.

 Vasher didn’t reply. He just stared at the palace.

 We should kill him, Nightblood continued. Come on. We should do it. We really should do it.

 “Why do you care?” Vasher whispered. “You don’t know him.”

 He’s evil, Nightblood said.

 Vasher snorted. “You don’t even know what that is.”

 For once, Nightblood was silent.

 That was the great crux of the problem. The bigger problem, the one that had led Vasher for most of his life. A thousand Breaths. That was what it took to Awaken an object of steel and give it sentience. Even Shashara hadn’t understood the process fully, though she had first divised it.

 It shouldn’t have worked. Nightblood should not be alive. And yet, he was. Shashara had been so certain of herself. She’d always been the most talented of them, even if she hadn’t been the one to fix the Lifeless problem.

 But she’d she’d figured this one out. Spured on by the knowledge that she’d been shown up once before. She studied, learned, practiced. And she’d done it. She’d learned to forge the Breath of a thousand people into a piece of steel, Awaken it to sentience, and give it a Command. That command took on immence power, providing foundation for the personality of the object Awakened.

 With Nightblood, she and Vasher had chosen such a simple, yet elegant, Command. Destroy evil. There was only one problem. One neither of them had foreseen.

 How was an object of steel--an object that was so removed from life that it would find the experience strange and foreign--to understand what ‘evil’ was?

 I’m figuring it out, Nightblood said. I’ve had a lot of practice.

 Even still, its voice was foreign. The sword wasn’t really to blame. It was a terrible, destructive thing--but it had been created to destroy. It still didn’t understand life, or what that life meant. It only knew its Command, and it tried so hard to fulfill it.

 That man down there, Nightblood said. The one in the palace. He holds the power to start this war. You don’t want this war to start. That’s why he’s evil.

 “Why does that make him evil?”

 Because he will do what you don’t want him to.

 “We don’t know that,” Vasher said. “Not for certain. Plus, who is to say that my will is best?”

 It is, Nightblood said. Let’s go. Let’s kill him. You told me war is bad. He will start a war. He’s evil. Let’s kill him. Let’s kill him.

 The sword was getting excited, and Vasher could feel it--feel the danger in its blade, the twisted power of Breaths that had been pulled from a living host and shoved into something unnatural. He could almost feel them breathing out, black and corrupted, twisting in the wind.

 Drawing him toward Lightsong. Pushing him onward.

 “No,” Vasher said.

 Nightblood sighed. You locked me in a closet, he reminded. You should apologize.

 “I’m not going to apologize by killing someone.”

 Just throw me in there, Nightblood said. If he’s evil, he’ll kill those around him, then kill himself. Then you can know.

 This gave Vasher pause. Colors, he thought. The sword seemed to be getting more subtle each year, though Vasher knew he was just seeing things. Awakened objects didn’t change or grow, they simply were what they were.

 Still, it was a good argument.

 “Maybe later,” he said, turning away from the building.

 You are afraid, Nightblood said.

 “You don’t know what fear is,” Vasher replied.

 I do. You don’t like killing Returned. You’re afraid of them.

 The sword was wrong, of course. But, on the outside, Vasher supposed that his hesitance to be around Returned did look a little like fear. It had been a long time since he’d dealt with them. Too many memories. Too many pains.

 He made his way to the God King’s palace. The structure was old, far older than the palaces of the Returned that surrounded it. Once, this hill and palace had been a seaside watchplace, overlooking the bay. No city. No colors. Just the stark, black tower. It amused Vasher that it had become the home of the God King of the Iridescent Tones.

 The palace rose into the air, several stories taller even than the wall. Guards patrolled below, but protecting a building such as this--with the numerous windows it had--was a larger task than they could accomplish. They relied on reputation to keep their God King safe.

 Vasher slid Nightblood into a strap on his back, then jumped.

 Awakened straps around his legs gave him strength, letting him leap some twenty feet. He slammed against the side of the building, smooth onyx blocks rubbing his skin. He twitched his fingers, and the straps on his sleeves snapped forward and grabbed hold of the ledge above him, twisting, holding him tight.

 He breathed. The belt at his waist--touching his skin, like always--Awakened. Color drained from the kerchief tied beneath his trousers to his leg.

 “Climb things, then grab things, then pull me up,” he Commanded. Three commands in one Awakening, a difficult task for some. For him, however, most Awakenings were as simple as blinking.

 The belt untied itself. Wrapped like it was, it looked far shorter than it really was. It actually gave him some twenty-five feet of rope, when it unwound completely, snaking up the side of the building, curling inside of a window. Seconds later, the rope hauled him up and into the air. He released his tassel grips, then pulled Nightblood free as the rope deposited him inside the building.

 He knelt silently, eyes searching the darkness. The room was unoccupied. Carefully, he drew back the Breath from the rope, then wrapped it around his arm and held it in a loose coil, should he need it again.

 He stalked forward.

 Who are we going to kill? Nightblood asked.

 It’s not always about killing, Vasher said.

 Vivenna. Is she in here?

 The sword was trying to interpret his thoughts again. It had trouble with things that weren’t fully formed into words in Vasher’s head. Most thoughts passed through his mind like they did those of other people. Fleeting, momentary. Flashes of image, sound, or scent. Connections made, then lost, then recovered again.

 Vivenna. The source of a lot of his troubles. His work in the city had been easier when he’d been able to assume she was working willingly with Denth. Then, at least, he’d been able to blame her.

 Where is she? Is she here? She doesn’t like me, but I like her.

 Vasher hesitated in the dark hallway. You do?

 Yes. She’s nice. And she’s pretty.

 Nice and pretty--words that Nightblood didn’t really understand. But, he had learned when to use them. Still, the sword did have opinions, and it rarely lied. It did like Vivenna, even if it couldn’t explain why.

 She reminds me of a Returned, the sword said.

 Ah, Vasher thought. Of course. That makes sense. He continued on.

 What? Nightblood said.

 She’s descended from one, he thought. You can tell by the hair. There’s a bit of Returned in her.

 Nightblood didn’t respond to that, but a part of Vasher could feel it thinking.

 He paused at an intersection. He was pretty sure he knew where the God King’s chambers would be. They’d be in the richest part of the palace. However, a lot of the interior seemed different now than it once had been. The fortress had been stark, built with odd twists and turns to confuse an invading foe. Those remained--all the stonework was the same--but many of the open dining halls or garrison rooms had been split into many, smaller rooms, colored with decorations after the way of the Hallandren rich.

 Where would the God King’s wife be? He couldn’t search the entire palace. If she were pregnant, she’d be under the care of servants. One of the nicer quarters, he assumed, on a higher level. He made his way to a stairwell and went up. Fortunately, it seemed late enough that there were very few people awake.

 The sister, Nightblood said. That’s who you’re after. You’re rescuing Vivenna’s sister!

 Vasher nodded quietly in the darkness, feeling his way up the stairs, counting on his BioChroma to let him know if he approached any people. Though most of his Breath was stored inside of his clothing, but he had just enough to awaken the rope, and to keep him aware.

 You like her too! Nightblood said.

 Nonsense, Vasher thought.

 Then why?

 Her sister, he thought. She’s a key to all of this, somehow. I realized it today. Vivenna mentioned that as soon as her sister arrived, the real move to begin the war surged. She’s right. There’s something going on.

 Nightblood fell silent. That kind of logical leap was a bit too complex for him.

 I see, Nightblood said, though Vasher smiled at the confusion he sensed in the voice.

 At the very least, Vasher thought, she’s a very convenient hostage. The God King’s priests--or whoever’s behind this--know that they can go war with an excellent prisoner in tow. If things turn sour for them, they can threaten the girl’s life. An excellent tool.

 One you intend to remove, Nightblood said.

 Vasher nodded, reaching the top of the stairwell and slinking through one of the corridors. He walked around until he saw some activity--a maid servant moving along one of the corridors. He Awakened his rope, stood in the shadows of an alcove, and waited for her to approach.

 As she passed, the rope shot from the shadows, wrapped around her waist, and yanked her into the darkness. He had one of his tassel hands wrapped around her mouth before she could get her breath back and scream.

 She squirmed, but the rope tied her tightly. He felt a little stab of guilt as he loomed over her, her terrified eyes looking up at him.

 He reached for Nightblood, and pulled the sword slightly out of its sheath. The girl immediately looked sick. A good sign.

 “I need to know where the queen is,” Vasher said, forcing Nightblood up so that his hilt touched her cheek. “You’re going to tell me.”

 He held her like that for a time, watching her squirm, feeling dissatisfied with himself. Finally, he relaxed the tassels on his hand, keeping the sword forced against her cheek. She began to vomit, and he turned her to the side.

 “Tell me,” he whispered.

 “Southern corner,” the girl whispered, trembling, spittle on her cheek. “This floor.”

 Vasher nodded, then tied her up with the rope, gagged her, and took his Breath back. He pushed Nightblood back into the sheath, did up the clasp, then rushed down the hallway.

 You won’t kill a God who plans to march his armies to war? Nightblood asked. But you’ll choke a young woman near to death?

 It was a complicated statement, for the sword. However, it lacked the accusation that a human would have put into the words. To Nightblood, it wasn’t an attack, but a question. He was trying to understand.

 I don’t understand my morality either, Vasher thought. I’d suggest you avoid confusing yourself.

 He found the place easily. It was guarded by a large group of brutish men. They seemed rather out of place in the fine palace hallways, and Vasher paused, frowning to himself.

 Something strange is going on here, he thought.

 What do you mean? Nightblood asked.

 He hadn’t meant to address the sword. That was the trouble with an object that could read minds. Any thoughts Vasher formed in his head, Nightblood thought were directed at it. After all, in the sword’s opinion, everything really should have been directed toward it.

 Guards at the door. Soldiers, not servants. So, they had already taken her captive. Was she even pregnant? Or, were the priests just securing their power?

 That many men would be impossible to kill without making noise. The best he could hope for was to kill them fast, without letting any run for help. Maybe they were far enough from anyone else that a little bit of fighting wouldn’t be heard.

 He sat for a few minutes, grinding his teeth. Then, finally, he stepped up and tossed Nightblood into the middle of them. He’d let them fight each other, and then be ready to stop any who weren’t taken into the Sword’s influence.

 Nightblood clanged to the stones and slid over to the men. All of their eyes turned toward it. And, at that moment, something grabbed Vasher around the shoulder and yanked him backward into the hallway.

 He cursed, spinning, throwing his hands up to wrestle with whatever had him. An Awakened rope.

 Men started to fight behind him. Vasher grunted, pulling free the knife in his boot, then reaching up to slice the Awakened rope. A body tackled him as he got free, however, and he was thrown back against the wall.

 He grabbed his attacker by the face with one of his arm tassels, then twisted the man back and threw him into the wall. Another form charged him from behind, but Vasher’s Awakened cloak caught that one, tripping him.

 “Grab things other than me,” Vasher said quickly, snatching the cloak of one of the fallen men. That cloak whipped about, taking down another man, whom Vasher killed with a swipe of his dagger. He kicked another man, throwing him backward, opening a pathway.

 Vasher spun, intending to dash back toward Nightblood, but three more figures burst out the rooms around him, cutting him off. They were the same kind of brutish men that were now fighting over the sword, by the queen’s room.

 Figures were all around. Dozens of them. Vasher kicked out, breaking a leg, but one man pulled Vasher’s cloak off with a lucky twist of his hands. Others piled on top of him. And then, another Awakened rope snapped back out, tying his legs together.

 He reached for his vest. “Your Breath to--” he began, trying to draw in some Breath to use for an attack, but three men grabbed his hand and pulled it away.

 Within seconds, he was wrapped up in the Awakened rope. His cloak still fought against three men, who were struggling to cut it up, but Vasher himself was pinned.

 A figure left the room to his left. It was the place where the rope had come from.

 “Denth,” Vasher spat.

 “My good friend,” Denth said, nodding for one of his lackeys--the one known as Tonk Fah--to move down the hallway toward the queen’s room. Denth knelt beside Vasher. “Very good to see you.”

 Vasher spat again.

 “Still as eloquent as ever, I see,” Denth said with a sigh. “You know the best thing about you, Vasher? You’re solid. Predictable. I guess I am too, in away. Hard to live as long as we have without falling into patterns, eh?”

 Vasher didn’t reply, though he did struggle as some men gagged him. A piece of him noticed with satisfaction that he’d taken down a good dozen of the men before they’d managed to pile on top of him and force him down.

 Denth eyed the fallen soldiers. “Mercenaries,” he said. “No risk is too great, assuming the pay is right.” He said it with a twinkle in his eye. Then, he leaned down, his jovialness gone as he met Vasher’s eyes.

 “And you were always to be my payment, Vasher. I owe you. For Shashara, even still.” Denth smiled. “We’ve been waiting, hiding in the palace here, knowing that eventually the good princes Vivenna would send you to save her sister.”

 Tonk Fah returned with a wrapped up bundle, held in a blanket. Nightblood. Denth eyed it. “Throw that out somewhere in the city,” he said, grimacing.

 “I don’t know, Denth,” Tonk Fah said. “I kind of think we should keep it. It could be very useful. . . .” The beginnings of the lust began to show in his eyes, the desire to draw Nightblood, to use the sword. To destroy evil. Or, really, just to destroy.

 Denth snatched the bundle away, then smacked Tonk Fah on the back of the head.

 “Ow!” Tonk Fah said.

 Denth rolled his eyes. “Stop whining; I just saved your life. Go check on the queen, then clean up that mess. I’ll take care of the sword myself.”

 “You always get so nasty when Vasher’s around,” Tonk Fah grumbled, waddling away to do as ordered. Denth wrapped up Nightblood securely, and Vasher watched, hoping to see the lust appear in Denth’s eyes.

 Denth, however, was far too strong-willed to be taken by the sword. He had nearly as much history with it as Vasher did.

 “Take away all his Awakened clothing,” Denth said to his men, walking away. “Then hang him up in that room over there. He and I are going to have a long talk about what he did to my sister.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-two

 Lightsong sat in one of the rooms of his palace, surrounded by finery, cup of wine in his hand. Despite the very late hour, servants moved in and out, piling up furniture, paintings, vases, and small sculptures. Anything that could be moved.

 The riches sat in heaps. Lightsong lounged back on his couch, ignoring empty plates of food and broken cups, which he refused to let his servants take away.

 A pair of servants entered, carrying a red and gold couch. They propped it up by the far wall, nearly toppling a pile of rugs. Lightsong watched them leave, then downed the rest of the wine in his cup. After that, he dropped it to the floor beside the others, and held out his hand for another full cup. A servant provided one, as always.

 He wasn’t drunk. He couldn’t get drunk.

 “Do you ever feel,” Lightsong said, “like something is going on? Something far greater than you are? Something that you can’t possibly understand? Like. . .a painting you can only see the corner of, no matter how you squint and search?”

 “Every day, your grace,” Llarimar said. He sat on a stool beside Lightsong’s couch. As always, he watched events calmly, though Lightsong could sense the man’s disapproval as another group of servants piled several marble figurines in the corner.

 “How do you deal with it?” Lightsong asked.

 “I have faith, your grace, that someone understands.”

 “Not me, I hope,” Lightsong noted.

 “You are part of it. But it is much larger than you.”

 Lightsong frowned to himself, watching more servants enter. Soon, the room would be so piled with his riches that people wouldn’t be able to move in and out.

 “It’s odd, isn’t it,” Lightsong said, gesturing toward a pile of paintings. “Arranged like this, none of it looks beautiful anymore. No matter how valuable something is, if you throw it together like this, it just seems like junk.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow. “The value in something relates to how it is treated, your grace. If you see these items as junk, then they are, regardless of what someone else would pay for them.”

 “There’s a metaphor in there somewhere, isn’t there?”

 Llarimar shrugged. “I am a priest, after all.”

 Lightsong snorted, then waved toward the servants. “That’s enough,” he said. “You can go now.”

 The servants, growing more resigned to being banished on occasion, left the room. Soon, Lightsong and Llarimar were alone with piles and piles of riches, all stolen from other parts of the palace and brought into this one room.

 Llarimar surveyed the piles. “So, what is the point of all this, your grace?”

 “This is what I mean to them,” Lightsong said, gulping down some more wine. “The people. They’ll give up any wealth for me. They’ll spend hours making works of art for me, will give up their very most precious creations. They sacrifice the Breath of their souls to keep me alive. I suspect that, even, they would die for me.”

 Llarimar nodded quietly.

 “And,” Lightsong continued, “all I’m expected to do is choose their fates for them. Do we go to war, or do we remain at peace? What do you think?”

 “I could argue for either side, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It would be easy to sit here and condemn attacking Idris on mere principle. War is a terrible, terrible thing. And yet, it seems that few great accomplishments in history ever occur without the unfortunate truth of military action. Even the Manywar, which caused so much destruction, can be pointed to as the foundation of Hallandren power in the inner sea area.”

 Lightsong nodded.

 “But,” Llarimar continued, shaking his head. “To invade our brethren? Despite provocation, I cannot help but think that attacking would be too extreme. How much death, how much suffering, are we willing to cause simply to prove that we won’t be pushed around?”

 “And what would you decide?” Lightsong said.

 “Fortunately, I don’t have to.”

 “And if you were forced to?” Lightsong asked.

 Llarimar sat for a moment. Then, carefully, he removed the large miter from his head, revealing a head of thinning black hair plastered to the skull with sweat. He ran his hand through the hair, setting aside the ceremonial headgear.

 “I speak to you as a friend, Lightsong, not your priest,” Llarimar said quietly. “For the priest cannot influence his God, for fear of disrupting the future.”

 Lightsong nodded.

 “And as a friend,” Llarimar said, “I honestly have trouble deciding what I would do. I didn’t argue on the floor of the court.”

 “You rarely do,” Lightsong said.

 “I have trouble making these kinds of decisions,” Llarimar said, wiping his brow with a kerchief, shaking his head. “I don’t think we can ignore the threat to our kingdom. The fact of the matter is, Idris is a rebel faction living within our borders. We’ve ignored them for years, suffering under their almost tyrannical control of the northern passes.”

 “So, you’re for attacking?”

 Llarimar paused, then shook his head. “No. No, I don’t think that even Iris’s rebellion would justify the slaughter it would take to get those passes back.”

 “Great,” Lightsong said flatly. “So, you think we should go to war, but not attack.”

 “Actually, yes,” Llarimar said. “We declare war, we make a show of force, and we frighten them into realizing just how precarious their position is. We shouldn’t have to manage them for much longer--the God King just married one of their daughters! One would think that things would be getting better between the two kingdoms, not worse.”

 Lightsong sat thoughtfully. “I don’t know,” he said. “It seems that we’re missing something, Scoot. Like I said before. A piece of all of this. You make a good point. Why now? Why are tensions so high after the thing that should have unified us?”

 “I don’t know, your grace,” Llarimar said.

 Lightsong smiled, standing and setting aside his cup. “Well then,” he said, eying his high priest. “Let’s find out.”

#

 Siri would have been annoyed if she hadn’t been so terrified. She sat alone in the black bedchamber that she had visited so often. It felt wrong for Susebron to not be there.

 At first, she’d hoped that maybe he would still come to her when night fell. It had been a silly thing to think, she knew, but still she had hoped that the routine would be firm enough to keep going.

 But, of course, he hadn’t come. What reason was there now? The priests had likely been hoping for a child from Siri, but that apparently wasn’t a priority now. She wasn’t sure if she believed her theories about them having a Returned child to be the next God King--but either way, Susebron did not come to her. She had no doubt that the choice to stay away was not his, and so she could only assume that he was being held captive as well.

 The door cracked, and she sat up on the bed, hope sparking. But, of course, it was only the guard checking on her again. One of the crass, soldier-like men who had been watching over her in recent hours.

 Why did they change to these men? she wondered as the guard closed the door. What happened to the Lifeless and the priests who were watching me before?

 It didn’t really matter. She lay back down on the bed, staring up at the canopy, still dressed in her fine gown. Her mind kept flashing to her first week in the palace, when she’d been locked inside for her ‘Wedding Jubilation.’ It had been difficult enough then, and she’d known when it would be over. Now she had nothing. Not even an assurance that she’d live through the next few days. She probably wasn’t important to their plans any more.

 No, she thought. Even if they intend to make a switch, they’ll keep me around for a few more months. Long enough for my ‘baby’ to be born. I’m insurance. If something goes wrong, they’ll still need me to provide an heir.

 That was little comfort. The thought of six months cooped up inside the palace--not allowed to see anyone lest they see that she wasn’t really pregnant--was frightening enough to make her want to scream.

 But what could she do?

 Hope in Susebron, she thought. I taught him to read, and I gave him the determination that he needed to break free from his priests.

 That will have to be enough.

#

 “Your grace,” Llarimar said, his voice hesitant, “are you certain you want to do this?”

 Lightsong crouched down, peeking through the bushes toward Mercystar’s palace. Most of the windows were dark. That was good. However, she still had a number of guards patrolling the palace. She was afraid of another break in.

 And rightly so.

 “Your grace?” Llarimar asked, sounding more nervous. The portly high priest knelt on the grass beside Lightsong, the darkness having masked their approach.

 “I should have brought a sword,” Lightsong said thoughtfully.

 “You don’t know how to use one, your grace.”

 “We don’t know that,” Lightsong said. “We don’t know much, actually.”

 “Your grace, this is foolishness. Let’s go back to your palace. If we must see what is in those tunnels, we can hire someone from the city to sneak in.”

 “That would take too long,” Lightsong said. A guard patrol passed their side of the palace. “You ready?” he asked once the patrol had passed.

 “No.”

 “Then wait here,” Lightsong said, taking off in a dash toward the palace.

 Llarimar let out an uncharacteristic curse from behind, and Lightsong heard the bushes rustle. He didn’t look back; he just kept running toward the open window on the ground floor. Like most Returned palaces, there weren’t doors in the doorways or closed windows in Mercystar’s palace. The tropical climate invited lots of open spaces.

 Lightsong reached the side of the building, feeling exhilarated. He climbed up through the window, then reached a hand out to help Llarimar when he arrived. The priest puffed and sweated, his physical condition nowhere near that of a God. But, he did arrive, and Lightsong managed to pull him up and into the room.

 They took a few moments, Llarimar resting with his back to the outer wall, gasping for breath.

 “You really need to exercise some more, Scoot,” Lightsong said, creeping toward the doorway and peeking out into the hall beyond.

 Llarimar didn’t answer. He just sat, puffing, shaking his head as if he couldn’t believe what was happening.

 “I wonder why the man who attacked the building didn’t come in through the window,” Lightsong said. Then he paused, noticing that the guards standing at the inner doorway had an easy view of this particular room. And, because of the outer hallway, the only rooms with windows would indeed be ones near enough to the doorways to be guarded by the men standing watch at the entrance.

 Ah, he thought. Well, then. Time for the backup plan.

 Lightsong stood up, walking out into the hallway. Llarimar followed, then started when he saw the guards. They had similar expressions of amazement on their faces.

 “Hello,” Lightsong said, then turned from them and walked down the hallway.

 “Wait!” one said. “Stop!”

 Lightsong turned toward them, frowning. “You dare command a God?”

 They froze. Then, they glanced at each other. One took off running in the opposite direction.

 “They’re going to alert others!” Llarimar said, rushing up. “We’ll be caught.”

 “Then we should move quickly!” Lightsong said, taking off in another run. He smiled, hearing Llarimar grudgingly break into a jog behind him. At that pace, they quickly reached the trap door.

 Lightsong knelt, feeling around for a few moments before finding the hidden clasp. He triumphantly pulled it open, then pointed down. Llarimar shook his head in resignation, then climbed down the ladder into darkness. Lightsong grabbed a lantern off the wall and followed. The remaining guard--unable to interefere with a god--simply watched with concern.

 The bottom wasn’t very far down. Lightsong found a tired Llarimar sitting on some boxes in what was obviously a small storage cellar.

 “Congratulations, your grace,” Llarimar said. “We’ve found the secret hiding place of their flour.”

 Lightsong snorted, moving through the chamber, poking at the walls. “Life,” he said, pointing at one wall. “That direction. I can feel it with my BioChroma.”

 Llarimar raised an eyebrow, standing. They pulled back a few boxes, and behind them was a tunnel into the wall. Lightsong smiled, then crawled down through it, pushing the lantern ahead of him.

 “I’m not sure I’ll fit,” Llarimar said.

 “If I fit, you will,” Lightsong said quietly, voice muffled by the close confines. He heard another sigh from Llarimar, followed by shuffling as the portly man entered the hole.

 Eventually, Lightsong passed through another hole into a much larger tunnel. He stood up, feeling self satisfied as Llarimar squeezed out through the opening. “There,” Lightsong said, throwing a lever and letting a grate drop down over the opening. “They’ll have trouble following now!”

 “And we’ll have trouble escaping,” Llarimar said.

 “Escape?” Lightsong said, raising his lantern, inspecting the tunnel. “Why would we want to do that?”

 “Pardon me, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But it seems to me that you are getting far too much enjoyment from this experience.”

 “Well, I am called Lightsong the Bold,” Lightsong said. “It feels good to finally be living up to the title. Now, hush. I can still feel life nearby.”

 The tunnel was obviously man-made, fashioned like what Lightsong expected a mine shaft might look. There were several branches. The life was straight ahead. Lightsong didn’t turn that direction first. Instead, he went left, toward a tunnel that sloped downward. He followed it for a few minutes, judging the trajectory.

 “Figured it out yet?” Lightsong asked, turning to Llarimar and pointing down the tunnel.

 “The Lifeless barracks,” Llarimar said. “If this tunnel continues like this, it will lead directly to them.”

 Lightsong nodded. “Why would anyone need a secret tunnel to the barracks? Any God can go there whenever he wants.”

 Llarimar shook his head, and they continued down the tunnel. Sure enough, after a short time walking, they arrived at a trap door which--when pushed up--led into one of the dark, Lifeless warehouses. Lightsong shivered, looking out at the endless rows of legs, barely illuminated by his lantern. He pulled his head back in, closed the trap door, then followed the tunnel around a bit more.

 “It goes in a square,” he said quietly.

 “With doors up into each of the Lifeless barracks I’ll bet,” Llarimar said. He reached out, taking a piece of dirt and crumbling it between his fingers. “This tunnel seems newer than the one we were in up above.”

 Lightsong nodded. “We should keep moving,” he said. “Those guards in Mercystar’s palace know we’re down here. I don’t know who they’ll tell, but I’d rather finish exploring before we get chased out.”

 Llarimar shivered at that thought. However, they walked back up the steep tunnel to the main one they’d left behind. Lightsong still felt life down a side tunnel, but he chose the other branch, exploring it a bit. However, it soon became apparent that this one diverged and twisted numerous times.

 “Tunnels to some of the other palaces,” he guessed, poking at a wooden structure used to hold the shaft open. “Old.”

 Llarimar nodded.

 “All right, then,” Lightsong said, turning back down the dusty shaft. “Time to find out where the main tunnel goes.”

 Llarimar nodded, then followed as Lightsong approached the main tunnel. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to determine how close the BioChroma was.

 It was. . .distant. Almost beyond his ability to sense. If everything else down in the tunnels hadn’t been rock and dirt, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed the life in the first place. He nodded to Llarimar, then continued down the tunnel, stepping quietly.

 Did it seem like he was capable of moving more silently than he should? Did he have skill in sneaking about? He certainly seemed to be better at it than Llarimar. Of course, a tumbling boulder was probably better at moving quietly than Llarimar, considering his bulky clothing and his puffing breath.

 The tunnel went on for a time without branches. Lightsong looked up, trying to judge what was above them.

 The God King’s palace, he guessed. That’s where this tunnel is going. He couldn’t be certain; it was difficult to judge direction beneath the ground.

 He felt. . .excited. Thrilled. This was something no God was supposed to do. Sneaking about at night, moving through secret tunnels, looking for secrets and clues.

 Odd, he thought. They give us everything they think that we might want, and glut us with sensation and experience. And yet, the real feelings--fear, anxiety, excitement--are completely lost to us.

 He smiled. In the distance, he could hear voices. He turned down the lantern and crept forward extra quietly, waving for Llarimar to stay behind.

 “. . .have him up above,” a masculine voice was saying. “He came for the princess’s sister, as I said he would.”

 “You have what you want, then,” said another voice. “Honestly, I think you pay far too much attention to that one.”

 “Do not underestimate Vasher,” first voice said. “He has accomplished more in his life than a hundred men, and has done more for mankind than you will ever be able to understand.”

 Silence.

 “Aren’t you planning to kill him?” said second voice.

 “Yes.”

 Silence.

 “You’re a strange one,” second voice said. “However, our goal is accomplished.”

 “You people don’t have your war yet,” first voice said.

 “We will.”

 Lightsong crouched beside a small pile of rubble, frowning to himself in the darkness. He could see light up ahead, but couldn’t distinguish much beyond some moving shadows.

 They were talking about the war, obviously. It seemed remarkably good luck that he’d found two men discussing these things. And yet, it was very late at night--anyone up was likely to be about clandestine activities. Beyond that, today had been the day that the vote had happened.

 “I have a job for you,” second voice said. “We’ve got someone I need you to interrogate.”

 “Too bad,” first voice said. “I’ve got an old friend to torture. I just had to pause to dispose of his monstrosity of a sword.”

 “Denth! Come back here!”
 “You didn’t hire me, little man,” first voice said, growing fainter. “If you want to make me do something, go get your boss. Until then, you know where to find me.”

 Silence. And then, something moved behind him. Lightsong spun, and could just barely make out Llarimar creeping forward. Lightsong waved him back, then moved over to join him.

 “What?” Llarimar whispered.

 “Voices, ahead,” Lightsong whispered back, the tunnel dark around them. “Talking about the war.”

 “Who were they?” Llarimar asked.

 “I don’t know,” Lightsong whispered. “But I’m going to find out. Wait here while I--”

 A voice screamed. Lightsong jumped immediately, turning toward the sound. It came from the place where he had heard the voices, and it sounded like. . . .

 “Let go of me!” Blushweaver yelled. “What do you think you’re doing! I’m a Goddess!”

 Lightsong stood up sharply. A voice said something back to Blushweaver, but Lightsong was now too far down the tunnel to hear.

 “You will let me go!” Blushweaver yelled. “I--” she cut off sharply, crying out in pain.

 Lightsong stood, heart pounding. He took a step forward.

 “Your grace!” Llarimar said, standing. “We should go for help!”

 “We are help,” Lightsong said. He took a deep breath. Then, surprising himself, he charged down the tunnel. He quickly approached the light, turning around a corner and coming into a section of tunnel that had been worked more delicately. In seconds, he was running on a smooth stone floor, and he burst into what appeared to be a dungeon or a cellar.

 Blushweaver sat, tied to a chair. A group of men wearing the God King’s priestly robes stood around her. There were several soldiers in the room, though they didn’t wear city guard uniforms.

 Blushweaver’s lip was bleeding, and she was crying through a gag that had been placed on her mouth. She wore a beautiful sleeping robe, but it was dirty and disheveled.

 The men in the room looked up in surprise, obviously shocked to see someone come up behind them. Lightsong took advantage of this shock, and threw his weight against the soldier nearest to him. He sent the man flying back into the wall, Lightsong’s superior size and weight knocking him aside with ease. After that, Lightsong knelt down and quickly pulled the fallen soldier’s sword from its sheath.

 “Aha!” Lightsong said, lowering the weapon at the men in front of him. “Who’s first?”

 The soldiers regarded him dumbly.

 “I say, you!” Lightsong said, thrusting at the next-closest guard. The sword, however, wasn’t held properly in his grip, and he missed the man by a good three inches.

 The guard finally realized what was going on, and he pulled out his own sword. The priests backed against the wall. Blushweaver blinked her tears, looking shocked.

 The soldier nearest Lightsong attacked, and Lightsong raised his blade awkwardly, trying to block, and doing a horrible job of it. The guard at his feet suddenly threw himself at Lightsong’s legs, toppling him to the ground. Then, one of the standing guards thrust his sword into Lightsong’s shoulder.

 The shoulder bled blood as red as that of any mortal. Suddenly, Lightsong knew pain. Pain greater than, literally, he’d ever known in his short life.

 He screamed.

 He saw, through tears, Llarimar heroically throwing himself at a guard from behind, but the attack was almost as poorly-executed as Lightsong’s own. The soldiers stepped back, several guarding the tunnel to see if any others arrived, another holding his bloodied blade toward Lightsong’s throat.

 Funny, Lightsong thought, gritting his teeth against the pain. That was not at all how I imagined this going.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-three

 Vivenna waited up for Vasher. And he did not return.

 She paced in the small, one-room hideout--the sixth in a series of quick moves, never more than a few days in each location. It was unadorned, as usual. It held only their bedrolls, Vasher’s pack, and a single flickering candle.

 Vasher would have chastised her for wasting the candle. For a man who held a fortune in Breaths, he was surprisingly frugal.

 She paced some more. She knew that she should probably just go to sleep. Vasher could take care of himself. It seemed that the only one in the city who couldn’t do that was Vivenna.

 And yet, he’d told her he was only going to go on a quick scouting mission. He often told her what he was doing. Though he seemed like such a solitary person, he apparently understood her desire to be a part of things. She felt so betrayed by Denth--so foolish for not watching more closely--that she wanted to be aware of what was going on around her.

 Denth. She’d never waited up for him to come back from a night mission. She’d been working with Vasher for a fraction of the time she’d spent with Denth. Why did she care so much now?

 And yet, though she had felt like she was Denth’s friend, she hadn’t really cared about him. He’d been amusing and charming, but distant. Vasher was. . .well, who he was. There was no guile with him. He wore no false mask or face. She’d only met one other person like that. Her sister, the one who would bear the God King’s child.

 Lord of Colors! Vivenna thought, still pacing. How did things turn out to be such a mess?

#

 Siri awoke with a start. There was shouting coming from outside her room. She roused herself quickly, moving over to the door and putting her ear to it. She could hear fighting. If she were going to run, perhaps now would be the time. She steeled herself, then pulled on the door.

 It was, of course, locked.

 She cursed, leaning her head forward and knocking it lightly against the door. Something was obviously happening in the palace. She’d heard fighting before--screaming, and men dying. And now again.

 Someone trying to rescue me, perhaps? She thought hopefully. But who?

 The door shook suddenly, and she jumped back as it opened. Tridees, high priest of the God King, stood in the doorway.

 “Quickly, child,” he said, waving to her. “You must come with me.”

 Siri looked desperately for a way to run. She backed away from the priest, and he cursed quietly, waving for a couple of soldiers in city guard uniforms to rush in and grab her. She ran and resisted as best she could, screaming for help.

 “Quiet, child!” Tridees said. “You fool! We’re trying to help you.”

 His lies rang flat in her ears, and she struggled as the soldiers pulled her from the room. Outside, bodies were lying on the ground, some in guard uniforms, others in nondescript armor, still others having grey skin.

 She heard fighting down the hallway, and she screamed toward it as the soldiers roughly pulled her away.

#

 Old Chaps, they called him. Those who called him anything, that was.

 He sat in his little boat, almost more of a canoe, moving across the dark water of the bay. Night fishing. During the day, one had to pay a tariff to fish in T’Telir waters. Well, technically, during the night you were supposed to pay too.

 But, the thing about night was, nobody could see you. Old Chaps chuckled to himself, lowering his net over the side of the boat. The waters made their characteristic lap, lap, lap against the side of the boat. Dark. He liked it dark. Lap, lap, lap.

 Occasionally, he was given better work. Taking bodies for one of the city’s slum lords, weighting them down with bits of rock tied in a sack to the foot, then tossing them into the bay. There were probably hundreds of them down there, floating in the current. Like a party of skeletons, having a dance. Dance, dance, dance.

 No bodies tonight, though. Too bad. That meant fish. Free fish, he didn’t have to pay tariffs on. And free fish were good fish.

 No. . . . a voice said to him. A little bit more to your right.

 The sea talked to him sometimes. Coaxed him this way or that. He happily made his way in the direction indicated. He was out on the waters every night, after all. They should know him pretty well by now.

 Good. Drop the net.

 He did so. It wasn’t too deep in this part of the bay. He could drag it behind his boat, pull part of the weighted bits along the bottom, catching the smaller fish that came up into the shallows to feed. Not the best fish to sell, but the night was looking too dangerous to be out far from the shore.

 His net struck something. He grumbled, yanking it. Sometimes, it got caught on debris or coral. Cursing to himself, he pulled it up. It was heavy. Too heavy. He pulled it over the side, then undid the shield on his lantern, risking a bit of light.

 A sword lay in the bottom of his boat. Silvery, with a black handle.

 Lap, lap, lap.

 Ah, very nice, the voice said, much louder now. I hate the water. So wet and icky down there.

 Transfixed, Old Chaps reached out, picking up the weapon. It felt heavy in his hand.

 I don’t suppose you’d want to go destroy some evil, would you? The voice said. I’m not really sure what that means, to be honest. I’ll just trust you to decide.

 Old Chaps smiled.

 Oh, all right, the sword said. You can admire me a little bit longer, if you must. After that, though, we really need to get back to shore.

#

 Vasher awoke groggily.

 He was tied, by his wrists, to a hook in the ceiling of a stone room. The rope that had been used to tie him, he noticed, was the same one he’d used to tie up the maid. It had been drained completely of color.

 In fact, everything around him was a uniform grey. He had been stripped save for a grey pair of undershorts. He groaned, his arms feeling numb from the awkward angle of being hung by his wrists.

 He wasn’t gagged. But, he had no Breath remaining--he’d used the last of it in the fight, to Awaken the cloak of the fallen man. So, he simply groaned, feeling drained as he spun slightly in his bonds.

 A lantern burned in corner. A figure stood next to it. “And so we both return,” Denth said quietly.

 Vasher didn’t reply. He simply hung his head.

 “I still owe you for Arsteel’s death too,” Denth said quietly. “I want to know how you killed him.”

 “In a duel,” Vasher said with a croaking voice.

 “You didn’t beat him in a duel, Vasher,” Denth said, stepping forward. “I know it.”

 “Then maybe I snuck up and stabbed him from behind,” Vasher said. “It’s what he deserved.”

 Denth backhanded him across the face, causing him to swing slightly from his bonds. “Arsteel was a good man!”

 “Once,” Vasher said, tasting blood. “Once, we were all good men, Denth. Once.”

 Denth was quiet. “You think your little quest here will undo what you’ve done?”

 “Better than becoming a mercenary,” Vasher said. “Working for whomever will pay.”

 “I am what you made of me,” Denth said quietly.

 “That girl trusted you. Vivenna.”

 Denth turned, eyes darkened, the lanternlight not quite reaching. “She was supposed to.”

 “She liked you,” Vasher said. “Then you killed her friend.”

 “Things got a little out of hand.”

 “They always do, with you,” Vasher said.

 Denth raised an eyebrow, face growing amused in the wan light. “I get out of hand, Vasher? Me? When’s the last time I started a war? Slaughtered tens of thousands? Killed my best friend’s sister?”

 Vasher didn’t reply. What argument could he make? That Shashara had needed to die? Revealing the cheaper Commands to make Lifeless had been bad enough. What if the way of making Awakened steel, like Nightblood, had entered the war? Undead monsters slaughtering people with Awakened swords crying for blood.

 None of that mattered to a brother who had seen his sister murdered.

 “I was going to let Tonk Fah have you,” Denth said, turning away again. “He likes hurting things. It’s a weakness he has. We all have weaknesses. With my direction, he’s been able to keep it only to animals. Even that transfixes him. Excites him.”

 Denth turned to him, holding up a knife. “And I’ve decided to figure out first hand what he finds so enjoyable about causing pain.”

#

 Dawn was approaching. Vivenna cursed quietly, throwing off her blanket, unable to sleep. She dressed, frustrated, but not sure why. Vasher was probably just fine. He was likely out carousing somewhere.

 Of course, she thought wryly, carousing. That sounds just like him.

 She knew better. He’d never stayed out an entire night before. Something had happened. And, the only person in the city who knew enough of his movements to realize the danger was Vivenna.

 She slowed as she pulled on her belt, glancing over at Vasher’s pack and the change of clothing he had inside of it.

 Every single thing I’ve tried since I left Idris has failed miserably, she thought, continuing to dress. I failed as a revolutionary, I failed as a beggar, and I failed as a sister.

 She still wasn’t even certain who she was. She wanted to be competent. To be capable. And yet, it seemed she’d fallen back to her old ways--that of just waiting.

 And what am I supposed to do? she thought. Go find him? I don’t even know where to start.

 She looked away from the pack. Failure. It wasn’t something she’d been accustomed to, back in Idris. Everything she’d tried there had turned out well. She’d studied, and had learned. She’d been favored.

 Maybe that is what this is all about, she thought, sitting. My hatred of Hallandren. My insistence on saving Siri, on taking her place.

 When her father had chosen Siri over her, it had been the first time in her life that she could remember feeling that she wasn’t good enough. So, she’d come to T’Telir, determined to prove that the problem hadn’t been with her. It’d had been with someone else. Anyone else. As long as Vivenna wasn’t flawed.

 But, Hallandren repeatedly proved that she was. And, now that she’d tried so many things and failed, she found it hard to act. To do anything. There was a chance that by acting she might fail--and that was so daunting that doing nothing seemed preferable.

 It seemed the crowning arrogance in Vivenna’s life. She bowed her head. One last bit of feathered hypocrisy to adorn her hair.

 You want to be competent, like you decided to be? She thought. You want to learn to be in control of what goes on around you, rather than just be pushed around?

 Then learn to deal with failure.

 It was frightening, but she knew it was true. The quickest way to teach someone to swim was to throw them in the lake.

 She stood up, walking to Vasher’s duffle-like pack. She pulled out a wrinkled overshirt and a pair of leggings she could tie over her trousers. Both had ties hanging down from the cuffs.

 Vivenna put them on. Vasher’s spare cloak followed. It smelled like him, and was cut--like his other one--into the vague shape of a man. She understood, now, one of the reasons his clothing looked so tattered.

 She pulled out a couple of colorful handkerchiefs. “Protect me,” she Commanded the cloak, imagining it grabbing people who tried to attack her. Then, she placed a hand on the sleeve of the shirt.

 “Upon call of necessity,” she Commanded, “become my fingers, and grip that which I must.” She’d only heard Vasher give the Command a couple of times, and she still wasn’t quite sure how to visualize what she wanted the shirt to do. She imagined the tassels closing around her hands like she had seen them do for Vasher. Finally, she Awakened the leggings, commanding them to strengthen her legs.

 The leg tassels began to twist, and she raised each foot in turn, letting them wrap around the bottoms. When she lowered her leg, she felt a taut energy. Her stance felt more firm, the leggings pulled tight against her skin. She smiled, nodding.

 Finally, she tied on the sword Vasher had given her. She still didn’t know how to use it, though she could hold it properly. It felt right to bring it.

 Then, she left.

 Time to go jump in the lake, she thought.

#

 Lightsong had rarely seen a Goddess cry.

 “It wasn’t supposed to go this way,” Blushweaver said, apparently heedless of the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I had things under control. I knew what I was doing.”

 The dungeons beneath the God King’s palace were in a small, cramped room. Cages lined both walls. They were large enough to hold a God. Lightsong couldn’t decide if that were coincidence or not.

 Blushweaver sniffled. “I thought I had the God King’s priesthood on my side. We were working together.”

 Something’s wrong about this, Lightsong thought, glancing at the group of priests chatting anxiously at the side of the room. Llarimar sat in his own cage--the one directly next to Lightsong--head bowed.

 Lightsong glanced back at Blushweaver. “How long?” he asked. “How long were you working with them?”

 “From the beginning,” Blushweaver said. “I was supposed to get the Command Phrases. We came up with the plan together!”

 “Why did they turn on you?” Lightsong asked, frowning.

 She shook her head, glancing down. “They claimed I didn’t do my part. That I was withholding things from them.”

 “Were you?”

 She looked away, eyes tear-stained. She looked very odd, sitting in her cell. A woman of deific proportions, wearing a fine silken robe, sitting on the ground, surrounded by bars.

 We have to get out of here, Lightsong thought. He crawled over to the bars separating his cage from Llarimar’s. “Scoot,” he hissed. “Scoot!”

 Llarimar glanced up. He looked haggard.

 “What does one use to pick a lock?” Lightsong asked.

 Llarimar blinked. “What?”

 “Pick a lock,” Lightsong said, pointing. “Maybe I’ll discover that I know how to do it, if I get my hands into the right position. I still haven’t figured out why my swordsmanship skills were so poor. But, surely I can do this. If I can only remember what to use.”

 Llarimar started at him.

 “Maybe I--” Lightsong began.

 “What is wrong with you?” Llarimar whispered.

 Lightsong paused.

 “What is wrong with you!” Llarimar bellowed, standing. “You were a scribe, Lightsong. A Colors-cursed scribe. Not a solider. Not a member of the watch. Not a detective. You were an accountant for a local moneylender!”

 What? Lightsong thought.

 “You were as much an idiot then as you are now!” Llarimar yelled. “Don’t you ever think about what you’re going to do before you just saunter off and do it! Why can’t you just stop, occasionally, and ask yourself if you’re being a complete fool or not? I’ll give you a hint! The answer us usually yes!”

 Lightsong stumbled back from the bars, startled. Llarimar. Llarimar was screaming. Lightstong always wondered if the priest had a snapping point. He’d pushed on numerous occasions to try and find it. And now, he suddenly felt very guilty.

 “And every time,” Llarimar said, turning away, “I end up in trouble with you. Nothing has changed. You become a God, and I still end up in prison!”

 The heavy priest slumped down, breathing in deep gasps, shaking his head in obvious frustration.

 Lightsong sat down, stunned. Blushweaver was staring at them. And so were the priests.

 What is it I find odd about them? Lightsong thought, trying to sort out his thoughts and emotions as the group of priests approached.

 “Lightsong,” one of them said, stooping down beside his cage. “We need your Command Phrases.”

 He snorted. “I’m sure you do. Well, I’m sorry to say that I’ve forgotten them. You probably know my reputation for being weak of mind. I mean, what kind of fool would come charging in here and get himself captured so easily, right?”

 He smiled at them.

 The priest by his change sighed, then waved a hand toward the others. They unlocked Blushweaver’s cage and pulled her out. She yelled and fought as she had before, and Lightsong smiled at the trouble she gave them. Yet, there were six priests, and they finally managed to get her out.

 Then, one got out a knife and slit her throat.

 The shock of the moment hit Lightsong like a physical force. He froze, eyes wide, watching in horror as the red blood spilled out the front of Blushweaver’s throat, staining her fine, beautiful nightgown. That was terrible enough.

 However, far more disturbing was the look of panicked terror in her eyes. Such beautiful eyes.

 “No!” Lightsong screamed, slamming against the bars, reaching helplessly through. He strained his godly muscles, pressing himself against the steel as he felt his body begin to shake.

 It was useless, of course. He had a perfect body, but even a perfect body couldn’t push its way through steel.

 “You bastards!” he yelled. “You colors-cursed bastards!” He struggled, pounding the bars with one hand, as Blushweaver’s eyes began to dim.

 And then, her BioChroma faded. Like a blazing bonfire dimming down to a single candle. Then puffing out.

 “No. . . .” Lightsong said, sliding down to his knees, feeling numb.

 The priest regarded him. “So you did care for her,” he said. “I’m sorry that we had to do that.” He knelt down, solemn. “However, Lightsong, I need you to know that we’re serious. I do know your reputation, of course. I know that you usually take things light-heartedly. That is a fine attribute to have in many situations. However, right now, you must realize how dangerous things are.”

 “Bastard. . . .” Lightsong whispered.

 “I need your Command Phrases,” the priest said. “This is very important. More important than you can understand.”

 “You can beat them out of me,” Lightsong growled, feeling rage slowly overwhelm his shock.

 “No,” the priest said, shaking his head. “We’re actually rather new to all of this. We don’t know how to torture, Lightsong, and those who do know how aren’t being very cooperative right now. Never pay a mercenary before the job is done.”

 The priest waved, and the others left Blushweaver’s corpse on the ground. Then they moved over to Llarimar’s cage.

 “No!” Lightsong screamed.

 “We are serious, Lightsong,” the man said. “Very, very, serious. We know how much you care for your high priest. You now know that we will kill if we need to.”

 “Why?” Lightsong said. “What is this even about? The God King could order us to move the armies if he wanted to! We’d listen to him. Why do you care so much about those Command Phrases?”

 The priests forced Llarimar from his cage, then pushed him to his knees. One took out a knife.

 “Red panther!” Lightsong yelled, weeping. “That’s the Command Phrase. Please. Leave him be.”

 The priest nodded to the others, and they put Llarimar back in his cell. They left Blushweaver’s corpse on the ground, face down in the blood, and left the room.

 “I hope that you haven’t lied to us, Lightsong,” the main priest said as he withdrew. “We are not playing games. It would be unfortunate if we discovered that you still are.” He shook his head. “We are not harsh men. But we are working for something very important. Do not test us.”

 With that, he left. Lightsong barely noticed. He was still staring at Blushweaver, trying to convince himself that he was dreaming, or that she was faking, or that something would change to make him realize that it was all just an elaborate scam.

 “Please,” he whispered. “Please, no. . . .”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-four

 “What’s the word on the street, Tuft?” Vivenna asked, siding up to a beggar.

 He snorted, holding out his cup to those few who passed in the early light. Tuft was always one of the first to arrive in the mornings.

 “Why do I care?” he said.

 “Come on,” Vivenna said. “You kicked me out of this spot on three different occasions. I figure you owe me something.”

 “I don’t owe nobody nothing,” he said, squinting at the street passers with his one eye. The other eye was simply an empty hole. He didn’t wear a patch. “Particularly don’t owe you nothing,” he said, glancing at Vivenna. “You were a plant all the time. Not a real beggar.”

 “I. . . .” Vivenna paused. “I wasn’t a plant, Tuft. I just thought I should know what it was like.”

 “Huh?”

 “Living among you,” she said. “I figured your life couldn’t be easy. But, I couldn’t know--not really know--until I tried it for myself. So, I came to the streets. Determined to live here for a week.”

 “Foolish thing to do,” he said with a snort.

 “No,” she said. “The fools are those who pass, without even thinking about what it must be like to live like you. Maybe if they knew, they’d actually give you something.”

 She reached into her pocket, pulling out one of the bright handkerchiefs she had stuffed in it. She placed one in the cup. “I don’t have any coins. But maybe you can sell that.”

 He grunted, eying it, but when he looked back at her it wasn’t just greed he seemed to display, but a hint of grudging respect as well.

 “What do you mean by word on the street?” he asked.

 “Disturbances,” Vivenna said. “Ones that are out of the ordinary. Perhaps involving Awakeners.”

 “Go to the Third Dock Slums,” Tuft said. “Maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for there.”

 #

 Light peeked through the window.

 Morning already? Vasher thought, head down, still hanging by his wrists.

 He knew what to expect from torture. He was not new to it. He knew how to scream, how to give the torturer what he wanted. He knew how to not expend his strength in resisting or tensing too much.

 He also knew that none of that was likely to do any good. It had only been a short time. How would he be after days of being hurt? Blood dripped down his chest, staining his undershorts. A dozen small pains itched at his skin, slices that had been smothered in lemon juice.

 Denth stood with his back facing Vasher, bloodied knives on the ground around him.

 Vasher looked up, forcing a smile. “Not as fun as you thought it would be, was it, Denth?”

 Denth didn’t turn.

 There’s still a good man in there, Vasher thought with a sigh. Even after all these years.

 He’s just been beaten down. Bloodied. Cut up worse than I have been.

 “Torturing me won’t bring her back,” Vasher said.

 Denth turned, eyes dark. “No. It won’t.” He picked up the knife again.

#

 The priests pushed Siri through the passageways of the palace. They occasionally passed bodies in the dark black hallways, and she could still hear fighting in places.

 What is going on?

 They left the hallways, entering one of the colorful rooms of the inner palace. Immediately, the white cuffs of Siri’s dress began to bend with color.

 She looked up with a sudden hope. The God King stood in the room, surrounded by a group of priests and soldiers.

 “Susebron!” she said, straining against her captives.

 He took a step toward her, but a guard held his arm, pulling him back.

 They’re touching him, Siri thought. All semblance of respect is gone. No need to pretend now.

 The God King looked down at his arm, frowning. He tried to tug it free, but another soldier stepped up to help hold him He glanced at this man, then at Siri, confused.

 “I don’t understand either,” she said.

 Tridees entered the room. “Bless the Colors,” he said. “You’ve arrived. Quickly, we must go. This place is not safe.”

 “Tridees,” Siri said, turning to glare at him. “What is going on?”
 He ignored her.

 “I am your queen,” Siri said. “You will answer my question.”

 He actually paused, surprising her. He turned with an annoyed look. “A group of Lifeless has attacked the palace, Vessel. They are trying to get to the God King.”

 Lifeless, attacking? I thought the Hallandren Gods controlled them.

 But, of course, that was silly. It wasn’t that difficult to make a Lifeless. Every one of the creatures couldn’t be under Hallandren control.

 Tridees was speaking with one of the other priests. “We have to move,” he said. “The palace has too many doorways and passages. It would be too easy to surround us.”

 “The tunnels?” the other priest said.

 “If we can get to them,” Tridees responded. “Where are those reinforcements?”

 A scream came from outside the room. Tridees turned, cursing, then began to motion for the guards to run. They hauled Susebron away, and Siri yelled after him. However, just a few moments later, fighting sounded from that direction. The soldiers reappeared, pulling Susebron back into the room, letting go of him.

 He quickly rushed to Siri, whose own captors let her go as they ran to begin fighting at the other doorway.

 Siri clung to her husband in the reddish room, and they backed to the center of it, fighting sounding from all directions. There were soldiers in each of the room’s four doorways, and Siri could see grey faces beyond. Men died one at a time, and finally a group of Lifeless burst through one of the doorways, overpowering the guards. They ran toward Susebron.

 Priests began to throw themselves in the way.

 Siri watched with horror as priest after priest jumped in front of the Lifeless, holding up their arms, bearing no weapons. Dying, cut down easily, all just to slow the Lifeless. She saw Tridees grit his teeth, terror showing in his eyes as he ran forward, throwing himself at a Lifeless. He died like the others.

 The Lifeless walked over the corpses. Susebron pushed Siri behind her, arms shaking as he backed toward a wall, facing down the bloodied monsters. But then, the Lifeless froze. From behind their ranks, a small, balding head appeared.

 “Bluefingers?” Siri asked with shock.

 He glanced around, apparently checking to make certain the soldiers and priests had been subdued. Then, he smiled wanly at Siri. “I believe you made me promise to get you out of the palace, should things turn against you,” he said. “Are you ready to go, then?”

#

 It was easy for Vivenna to find the location her beggard friend had referencced. The building--a slum tenement--was surrounded by gawkers, despite the morning hour. People whispered, talking about spirits, and death, and ghosts from the sea. Vivenna frowned, standing at the perimeter, trying to decide what had drawn their attention.

 The docks were to her left, the sea brine pungent. The dock slums, where many of the dockhands lived and drank, were a small section of buildings clustered between warehouses and shipyards.

 Why would Vasher have come here? He had been planning to visit the Court of Gods. She glanced toward it, rising on the plateau-like hill, overlooking the bay.

 Apparently there had been a murder in the building near her. People whispered of ghosts, but Vivenna simply shook her head. Not what she was looking for. She’d have to--

 Vivenna? The voice was faint, but she could just barely make it out. And recognize it.

 “Nightblood?” she whispered, glancing toward the building.

 Vivenna. Come get me.

 She shivered. She wanted to turn and run--even thinking about the sword made her feel nauseous. Yet, Vasher carried the sword.

 Was he the person who had been killed?

 Suddenly concerned, she shoved her way through the crowd, ignoring yells that she should stay back, that the building was cursed. She climbed up the stairs, passing door after door. In her rush, she almost missed the one with black smoke creeping underneath it into the stairwell.

 She paused. Then, taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

 The room was poorly kept, the floor littered with trash, the furniture splintered and worn. Four bodies lay dead on the floor. Nightblood was sticking from the chest of the fourth, an old man with a leathery face,

 Vivenna! Nightblood said happily. You found me. I’m so excited. I tried to get them to take me to the Court of Gods, but it didn’t turn out well. Though, he did draw me a little bit. That’s good, right?

 She fell to her knees, feeling sick.

 Vivenna? Nightblood asked. I did well, right? Varatridees threw me into the ocean, but I came back out. I’m quite satisfied. You should tell me that I did well.

 She didn’t respond.

 Oh, Nightblood said. And, Vasher is hurt, I think. We should go to him.

 She looked up. “Where?” she asked, uncertain if the sword would even be able to hear her.

 The God King’s palace, Nightblood said. He went to get your sister out. I think he likes you, even though he says he doesn’t. He says you’re annoying.

 Vivenna blinked. “Siri? You went after Siri?”

 Yes, but Varatridees stopped us.

 “Who is that?” She asked, frowning.

 You call him Denth. He’s Shashara's brother. I wonder if she’s here too. I’m not sure why he threw me in the water. Why would he do that? I thought he liked me.

 “Vasher. . . .” she said, climbing back to her feet, feeling woozy from the sword’s influence. Vasher had been taken by Denth.

 She remembered the anger in Denth’s voice when he’d spoken of Vasher during their time together. She shivered. Then, she gritted her teeth and grabbed a dirty blanket off the bedroll and wrapped it around Nightblood so that she wouldn’t have to touch him.

 Ah, Nightblood said. You don’t really need to do that. I had the old man clean me off after he got me out of the water.

 She ignored the sword, managing to lift the bundle with only a small amount of nausea. Then, she left, heading for the Court of Gods.

#

 Lightsong sat, staring at the stones in front of him. A little trickle of Blushweaver’s blood was making its way down a crack in the rock.

 “Your grace?” Llarimar asked quietly. He stood up against the bars between their cages.

 Lightsong didn’t respond.

 “Your grace, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

 “What good is Godhood?” Lightsong whispered.

 Silence. Lanterns flickered on either side of the small chamber. Nobody had cleaned up Blushweaver’s body, though they had left a couple of priests and Lifeless behind to watch Lightsong. They still needed him, should it turn out that he’d lied about the Command Phrases.

 He hadn’t.

 “What?” Llarimar finally asked.

 “What good is it?” Lightsong said, still staring forward. “We aren’t Gods. Gods don’t die from a wound like that. A little cut. Not even as wide as my palm.”

 “I’m sorry,” Llarimar said. “She was a good woman, even among Gods.”

 “She wasn’t a God,” Lightsong said. “None of us are. I’ve always known it. Nobody pays attention to me, though. Shouldn’t they listen to the one they worship? Particularly if he’s telling you not to worship him?”

 “I. . . .” Llarimar seemed at a loss for words.

 “They should have seen,” Lightsong said, letting his voice grow bitter. “They should have seen the truth about me. An idiot. Not a God, but a scribe. A foolish little scribe who was allowed to play divinity for a few years. A coward.”

 “You’re no coward,” Llarimar said.

 “I couldn’t save her,” Lightsong said. “I couldn’t do anything. I just sat there and screamed. Maybe if I’d been more brave, I’d have joined with her and taken control of the armies. But, I hesitated. And now she’s dead.”

 Silence.

 “You were a scribe,” Llarimar said quietly to the damp air. “And you were one of the best men I’d ever known. You were my brother.”

 Lightsong looked up.

 Llarimar stared out through the bars, looking toward one of the flickering lanterns set in the stark stone wall. “I was a priest, even then. I worked in the palace of Kindwinds the Honest. I saw how he lied, however, to play the games of politics. The longer I spent in that palace, the less I began to believe in the Iridescent Tones.”

 He fell silent for a moment, then he looked up, meeting Lightsong’s eyes.

 “And then, you died. Died rescuing my daughter from drowning. That’s the girl you see in your visions, Lightsong. The description is perfect. She was your favorite niece. Still would be, I assume. If you hand’t. . . .”

 He shook his head. “When we found you on the shore, dead, I lost hope. I was going to resign my position. I knelt above your body, weeping. And then, the Colors started to glow. You lifted your head, body changing, getting larger, muscles growing strong.

 “I knew it at that moment. I knew that if a man like you were chosen to return--a man who had died to save another--then the Iridescent Tones were real. The visions were real. And the Gods were real. You gave me my faith back, Stennimar.”

 He met Lightsong’s eyes. “You are a God. To me, at least. It doesn’t have to do with how easily you can be killed, how much Breath you have, or how you look. It has to do with who you are, and what you mean.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-five

 “I’m sorry, miss,” the guard said, holding up a hand. “All access to the Court of Gods is forbidden.”

 Vivenna ground her teeth. “This is unacceptable,” she said. “I’m to report to the Goddess Allmother at once! Can’t you see how many Breaths I hold? I’m not someone you can just turn away!”

 The guards remained firm. There were a good two dozen of them at the gates, forbidding anyone who tried to enter. Breaths or no Breaths, it appeared that Vivenna was no exception.

 She turned away. Whatever Vasher had done inside the night before, he’d apparently caused quite a stir. People clustered around the gateway to the Court, demanding answers, asking if something was wrong. Vivenna made her way back through them, leaving the gates behind.

 Go to the side, Nightblood said. Vasher never asks if he can enter. He just goes in.

 Vivenna glanced at the side of the plateau. There was a short ledge of ground running around the outside of the wall. With the guards so distracted by the people wanting in. . . .

 She slipped to the side, walking around the Court. There were guards on the wall above--she could feel them with her BioChroma. However, they were moving about, and it was early yet, the sun not having crested the eastern mountains. Plus, there were those large tapestries hanging down from the sides of the wall.

 She waited until one patrol had passed, then Awakened one of the tapestries. “Lift me,” she said, dropping a drained handkerchief.

 The tapestry wrapped around her, drawing her into the air and setting her on the walltop. She glanced about, recovering her breath. To the side, a ways away, a group of guards was pointing at her.

 You’re not any better at this than Vasher is, Nightblood noted. You people can’t sneak at all.

 She cursed, Awakening the tapestry again, having it lower her down into the Court. She recovered her breath, then took off running across the grassy lawn. Few people were about, but that only made her feel like she stood out even more.

 The palace, Nightblood said. Go there.

 That was where she was going. However, the longer she held the sword, the more she was coming to realize that it tended to say whatever it wanted, no matter whether or not its comments had any relevance. Like a child, speaking or asking questions as they occurred to it.

 The front of the palace was very well guarded by a group of men who weren’t wearing uniforms. Vivenna slowed as she approached, not wanting to draw any more attention. Still, few people were near the palace, and so her approach was noticed.

 He’s in there, Nightblood said. I can feel him. Third floor. Where he and I were before.

 And, Vivenna got an image of the room shoved into her head. She frowned.

 Remarkably useful, she thought, for an evil weapon of destruction.

 I’m not evil, Nightblood said, voice not defensive, simply informative. As if reminding her of something she’d forgotten. I destroy evil. I think maybe we should destroy those men up ahead. They look kind of evil. Right? You should pull me out.

 She paused. For some reason, she doubted that would be a good idea.

 Come one, Nightblood said.

 The soldiers were pointing at her. She glanced behind, and saw others rushing across the lawn.

 Austre, forgive me, she thought. Then, gritting her teeth, she threw Nightblood--blanket and all--toward the guards in front of the building.

 They haulted. To a man, they stopped paying attention to her, looking down at the sword as it rolled free of the blanket, silver sheath glistening on the lawn.

 Well, I guess this works too, Nightblood noted, voice feeling distant now.

 One of the soldiers picked up the sword. Vivenna dashed to the swide, ignored by the soldiers. They started to fight.

 Can’t go that way, she thought, eying the front entrance. There were too many people--even if they ignored her, she’d have to push her way through fighting men. So, instead, she ran to the side of the massive palace.

 The lower levels were made of step-like black blocks. Above these, it grew into a more traditional fortress, with steep walls. But, there were windows, if she could get to them.

 She twitched her fingers, making the tassels on her sleeves clench and unclench. Then, she jumped, her Awakened leggings tossing her up a few extra feet. She reached up, then made the tassels grab the edge of the large, black block. The tassels held, just barely, gripping the stone like foot-long fingers. With difficulty, Vivenna pulled herself up onto the block.

 Men yelled and screamed below, and she spared a glance. The one who had grabbed Nightblood was fighting off the others, a small trail of black smoke swirling around him. As she watched, he backed into the entryway of the palace itself, the other men following him.

 So much evil, Nightblood said, like a woman tisking as she cleaned cobwebs from her ceiling.

 Vivenna turned away, feeling guilty for giving the sword to the men. But what else was there to do? She jumped up and pulled herself onto the next block, continuing as the guards who had seen her on the walls arrived. They wore the colors of the city watch, and while a couple of them got caught up in the Nightblood fight, most of them ignored it, moving to the sides of the building, apparently running for other entrances.

 Vivenna continued her way up.

 To the right, Nightblood said distantly. That window on the third floor. Two over. He’s in there. . . .

 And his voice faded. Vivenna looked up, glancing at the window indicated. She still had to climb up a number of blocks, then somehow reach a window that was an entire story up a sheer, steep wall. There did appear to be some stonework that could make for handholds, but she grew dizzy at even thinking about it.

 An arrow snapped against the stone beside her, making her jump. Below, several guards had bows, and they were firing.

 Colors! she thought, running and pulling herself up on the next block. She heard a whoosh behind her, and cringed, feeling as if she should have been struck. However, nothing happened. She pulled herself up onto the block, then twisted around.

 She barely caught sight of her cloak holding an arrow. She started, remembering that she had Awakened it. It dropped the arrow, then returned to normal.

 Handy, that, she thought, climbing up the last block. By the time she got up on top of it, her arms were sore and tired, and her legs were doing little better. Fortunately, her Awakened fingers were still gripping as well as ever, and her cloak continued to catch arrows. She took a deep breath, then began to climb up the sheer outside of the black fortress.

 And decided, for her own sanity, that she’d probably better avoid looking down.

#

 Lightsong didn’t know what to make of his life. Too much information. To much was happening. Blushweaver’s death and Llarimar’s revelation, all in such quick succession.

 He sat in his cell, arms wrapped around himself, gold and red robes dirtied from crawling through the tunnel, then sitting in his cage.

 The priests talked quietly on the far side of the room. And, oddly, as he glanced at them, something took his mind away from everything else. A diversion, of sorts.

 He finally realized what was bothering him about them. He should have seen it earlier. It had to do with color--not the color of their clothing, but the color of their faces. It was just slightly off. The deviation in one man would have been easy to ignore. And yet, all of them together. . .it was a pattern.

 No regular person could have noticed it. But, to a man with his Heightenings, it seemed obvious, once he knew what to look for.

 These men were not from Hallandren.

 Anyone can wear a priest’s robes, he realized.

#

 “Bluefingers,” Siri said, frowning. “Where are we going?”

 The labyrinth of the God King’s palace was complex, and it was sometimes difficult even still for her to find her way about. They’d traveled down a stairwell, but now seemed to be going up a different one.

 Bluefingers didn’t answer. He walked with his customary nervousness, wringing his hands. The fighting in the hallways seemed to be decreasing. In fact, this latest hallway was dreadfully quiet.

 Siri walked with Susebron’s nervous arm around her waist. She didn’t know what he was thinking--they hadn’t been able to pause long enough for him to write anything. He gave her a comforting smile, but she knew that this all must be just as confusing for him as it was for her. Probably more so.

 The procession paused beside the stairwell.

 “Bluefingers?” she asked, turning to the brown robed scribe again.

 He looked at her, then glanced away. A Lifeless laid his hand on her shoulder.

 Siri began to grow afraid. And, then--suddenly--things began to click into place.

 The fighting in the palace, she thought. Several groups have been fighting back and forth, siezing control of my room, and then me and Susebron. One force belongs to the priests. The second force--the one with the Lifeless--belongs to someone else.

 The Lifeless guards pulled Siri and Susebron apart. She cringed, crying out, reaching for him.

 “Bluefingers. . . .” she said with trepidation. “What is happening?”
 He didn’t look at her.

 This entire war buildup has always seemed so strange, she thought, growing numb. Why would the Hallandren be so eager for war? Who would want to rile them up to attack Idris? What would they really gain?

 “You’re from Pahn Kahl. . . .” she whispered.

 “We’ve been dominated for centuries,” Bluefingers said. “Everyone always just assumes that we’re Hallandren. Everyone talks like we should worship the Returned. We’ve been a conquered people for so long, everyone thinks we might as well just join with our captors!”

 Colors. . . . Siri thought. “War between Idris and Hallandren,” she said. “It would leave both weakened. Even though we all know that Hallandren will probably win, it will cost lots of soldiers.”

 “It is the only way we’d ever be able to break free,” Bluefingers said.

 “But, you can’t!” Siri said. “The Idrians are innocent!”

 Bluefingers shook his head. “How many of my people would you sacrifice, if it would mean the freedom for yours?”

 “None!” she said.

 “I should like to see you say that if our positions were reversed,” he said, still not meeting her eyes. “I’m. . .sorry for your pain. But, your people are not innocent. They’re the same as the Hallandren. In the Manywar, you rolled over us, made us your workers and slaves. Only at the end, when the royal family fled, did Idris and Hallandren split.”

 “Please,” Siri said.

 Susebron suddenly punched a Lifeless. The God King growled, struggling as he kicked at another. There were dozens of them. He looked at her, waving a hand, motioning for her to flee. However, the Lifeless beside her had her held firm.

 A couple of men in the robes of Susebron’s priesthood left the stairwell ahead of them, carrying lanterns. Siri, looking closely, immediately recognized them as being from Pahn Kahl. They were too short, and their skin was just faintly off.

 I’ve been a fool, she thought. The one man I shouldn’t trust was the one I did!

 But, he had played the game so well. Driving a wedge between her and the priests from the start, hinting at their secret purpose. Most of her concern and worry, she’d gotten from him--and it had been reinforced by the priest’s arrogance and refusal to talk to her.

 “We have Lightsong’s Command Phrase,” one of the new men said to Bluefingers. “We have checked it, and it works. We changed it to the new one.”

 Siri glanced to the side. The Lifeless had pulled Susebron to the ground. He yelled, but without a tongue, it came out as a strangely loud moan. Siri yanked suddenly, trying to escape her Lifeless and help him, but it didn’t work.

 He was right all along, she thought. We should have trusted the priests.

 To the side, Bluefingers nodded to his accomplaces, looking fatigued. “Very well. Give the Command. Order the Lifeless to march on Idris.”

 “It will be done,” the man said, laying a hand on Bluefingers’ shoulder.

 Bluefingers nodded. He seemed oddly morose as the others withdrew.

 “What do you have to be sad about?” she spat.

 Bluefingers turned toward her. “My friends now hold the only Command Phrases for those Lifeless. Once they give the order to march on Idris, Commanding the Lifeless to destroy everything they find there, my friends will kill themselves with poison. Nobody will be left alive who can stop the creatures.”

 Austre. . . . Siri thought, feeling numb. Lord of Colors. . .

 “Take the God King below,” Bluefingers said, waving to several Lifeless. “Hold him until it is time.” They were joined by a scribe in a brown robe as they towed Susebron toward the stairwell. Siri reached for him. He continued to struggle, reaching back, but the Lifeless were too strong. She listened to his yells echoing down the stairwell.

 “What will you do with him?” Siri asked, tears cold on her cheeks.

 Bluefingers glanced at her, but once again, would not meet her eyes. “There will be many in the Hallandren government who see the Lifeless charge as a political faux pas, and they may seek to stop the advance. Unless Hallandren actually commits itself to this war, then our sacrifice will be useless.”

 “I don’t understand.”

 “We will take the bodies of Lightsong and Blushweaver--the two gods with the Command Phrases--and leave them in the Lifeless barracks, surrounded by dead Idrians. Then, we will leave the corpse of the God King to be discovered in the palace dungeons. Those who investigate will assume that Idrian assassins attacked and killed him--we’ve hired enough mercenaries from the Idrian slums that it shouldn’t be too difficult to believe. Those scribes who survive the night will solidify the story.”

 Siri blinked out tears. They’ll find Lightsong and Blushweaver, and assume they ran to release the Lifeless. Everyone will assume that they sent the armies as retribution for the death of the God King.

 And, with the king dead, the people will be angry. Even more willing to support the war.

 “I wish you hadn’t gotten involved in all of this,” Bluefingers said, motioning for her Lifeless captors to pull her along. “It would have been easier for me if you’d been able to keep yourself from getting pregnant.”

 “I’m not!” she said.

 “The people think you are,” he said with a sigh as they walked toward the stairwell. “And that’s enough. We have to break this government. And, we have to make the Idrians mad enough to want to destroy the Hallandren. I think they’ll do better in this war everyone says, especially if the Lifeless march as they do, without direction. They can be ambushed, perhaps reduced somewhat.

 He glanced at her. “But, for this war to work right, the Idrians have to want to fight. Both sides have to hate each other. . . .”

 And what better way to do that, she thought, than to kill me? Both sides will see the death of my supposed child as an act of war. The Hallandrens, because they’ll think they lost their heir--that their monarchy is broken--the Idrians because they’ll assume I was killed by Hallandren deceit.

 This won’t simply be a war of domination. It will be a drawn out war of hatred. The Idrians will pull back into the hills and the caves. The fighting could last for decades.

 And nobody will ever realize that our real enemy--the one who started it all--is the peaceful, quiet country to the south of Hallandren.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-six

 Vivenna hung outside the window, breathing deeply, sweating heavily. She’d peeked inside. Denth was in there, as was Tonk Fah. Vasher hung from a rope at the ceiling. He was bloodied, and he held no Breath, but he seemed to still be alive.

 Denth wore his sword.

 Can I stop them both? she thought. Her arms were tired. She had a length of rope in her pocket. What if she threw it and missed?

 She had seen Denth fight. He was faster than she’d thought possible of a man. She would have to surprise him. And, if she missed, she would die.

 What am I doing? she thought. Hanging from a wall, about to challenge two professional soldiers?

 Yet, her recent past gave her the strength to push down her fear. They might kill her, but that would be a quick end. Well, she’d survived betrayals, deaths of friends, and a time going mad from the fatigue, hunger, and terror of living on the streets. She’d been pushed down, forced to admit that she’d unwittingly betrayed her people. There wasn’t really any more they could do to her.

 And, for some reason, those thoughts gave her power. She smiled, surprised at her own determination as she quietly recovered the Breath from her cloak and her leggingss. Vasher had warned her to never go into a fight with all of her Breath tied up.

 Then, she Awakened a pair of rope bits, telling them to grab when thrown. Finally, she took a deep breath and threw herself up through the window and into the room.

 Vasher was moaning. Tonk Fah was dozing in the corner. Denth, holding a bloody knife, looked at her immediately as she hopped up through the window.

 The look of utter shock on his face was, in itself, almost worth everything she’d been through. She tossed the rope at him, then threw the other at Tonk Fah, who was sitting up in shock.

 Denth reacted immediately, cutting the rope out of the air with his dagger. The pieces of it twisted and wiggled, but weren’t long enough to grab anything. The one she threw at Tonk Fah however, hit. He cried out suddenly as it wrapped around his face and neck, coming awake.

 Vivenna pulled to a halt beside Vasher’s swinging body. Denth had his sword out already; he’d pulled it free more quickly than she could track.

 Vivenna gulped, then pulled out her own sword, holding it forward as Vasher had taught her. Denth paused just briefly in surprise.

 That was enough. She swung--not for Denth, but for the rope holding Vasher to the ceiling. He fell with a grunt, and Denth struck, slamming the point of his dueling blade through her shoulder.

 She fell, gasping in pain.

 Denth stepped back. “Hello, princess,” he said, warily holding his blade. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

 Tonk Fah made a gagging sound as the rope twisted around his neck, choaking him. He struggled to pull it free with little sucess.

 Once, the pain in her shoulder might have been dehabilitating. But, after the beatings she’d taken on the street, it seemed somewhat familiar to her. She looked up, and met Denth’s eyes.

 “Was this supposed to be a rescue?” Denth asked. “Because honestly, I’m not very impressed.”

 Tonk Fah knocked over his stool in his thrashing. Denth glanced at him, then back at Vivenna. There was a moment of silence, save for Tonk Fah’s weakining struggles. Finally, Denth cursed jumped over to cut at the rope on his friend’s neck.

 “You all right?” Vasher asked from beside her. She was shocked by how solid his voice sounded, despite his bloodied body.

 She nodded.

 “They’re going to send Lifeless marching on your homeland,” he said. “We’ve been wrong about this all along. I don’t know who’s behind it, but I think they’re winning the fight for the palace.”

 Denth finally got the rope cut free.

 “You need to run,” Vasher said, wiggling his hands free from their rope bonds. “Get back to your people, tell them not to fight the Lifeless. They need to flee the country, head through the northern passes.”

 Vivenna glanced back at Denth, who was smacking Tonk Fah back awake. Then, she closed her eyes. “Your Breath to mine,” she said, drawing back in the Breath from her hand tassels. Then, she reached out, placing her hand on Vasher’s back.

 “Vivenna. . . .” he said.

 “My life to yours,” she said. “My Breath become yours.”

 Her world became a thing dullness. Beside her, Vasher gasped, then began to convulse slightly at the bestowal of Breath. Denth stood up, spinning.

 “You do it,” Vivenna whispered. “You’ll be far better at it than I will be.”

 “Stubborn woman,” Vasher said as he overcame the convusions. He reached out, as if to restore her Breath to her, but he noticed Denth.

 Denth smiled, raising his blade. Vivenna put a hand to her shoulder, stopping the blood flow, and she began to push herself back toward the window--though, without Breath, she wasn’t certain what she intended to do there.

 Vasher stood, taking her sword in his hand. He wore only the bloody undershorts, but his stance was firm. He slowly wrapped the rope that had been holding him up around his waist, forming his characteristic belt.

 How does he do it? she thought. Where does his strength come from?

 “I should have hurt you more,” Denth said. “I took my time. Savoring it too much.”

 Vasher snorted, tying off the belt. Denth seemed to be waiting, anticipating something.

 “I’ve always found it funny that we bleed, just like regular men,” Denth said. “We might be stronger, but we die just the same.”

 “Not the same,” Vasher said, raising Vivenna’s blade. “Other men die with far more honor than we, Denth.”

 Denth smiled. Vivenna could see excitement in his eyes. He always claimed that there was no way Vasher could have beat his friend, Arsteel, in a duel, she thought. He wants to fight Vsher. He wants to prove to himself that Vasher isn’t as good as he is.

 Blades whipped into motion. And, after just a quick exchange, Vivenna could see that there was no contest. Denth was the better. His blade was more quick, his stance more controlled.

 Perhaps it was Vasher’s wounds. Or, perhaps it was the growing anger she saw in Vasher’s eyes as he fought. Maybe he really just wasn’t as good as Denth. However, as Vivenna watched, she realized that Vasher was going to lose this fight.

 I didn’t do all of this so you could just die! she thought, rising to try to help.

 A hand fell on her shoulder, pushing her back down. “I don’t think so,” Tonk Fah said, looming over her. “Nice trick with the rope, by the way. Very clever. I know a few tricks with ropes myself. Did you know, for instance, that a rope can be used burn a person’s flesh?” He smiled. Then, he leaned down. “Mercenary humor, you see.”

 His cloak slid slightly off his shoulder, falling against her cheek.

 Wait a minute, she thought. That’s the same cloak he was wearing before. When I escaped from him. I tried to Awaken it, but used a bad Command.

 She smiled, glancing over her shoulder. Vasher had backed against the far wall, to the window, and he was sweating profusely, bloody drops falling to the ground. Denth forced him back again, and Vasher stepped up on the table by the far wall, seeing high ground.

 She looked back at Tonk Fah, his cloak still touching her cheek. “Your Breath to mine,” she said. And, she felt a sudden, welcoming burst of Breath.

 “Huh?” Tonk Fah said, looking away from the dueling men, turning back toward her.

 “Nothing,” she said. “Just. . .Attack and grab Denth!” Command made, visualization made, the cloak began to quiver. Tonk Fah’s shirt drained of color, and he looked down with surprise.

 The cloak suddenly whipped into the air, yanking Tonk Fah to the side causing him to stumble away from her.

 That’s why I’m the princess, and you’re just a mercenary, she thought with satisfaction, rolling over.

 Tonk Fah cried out. Denth spun at the sound, eyes opening wide as the very large, very uncoordinated Pahn Kahl man rammed into him, cloak whipping about. Denth slammed backward, catching Vasher by surprise as well.

 Tonk Fah grunted. Denth cursed.

 And Vasher was shoved backward out the window.

 Vivenna blinked in surprise. Denth cut away the cloak, pushing Tonk Fah back.

 All was silent in the room for a moment.

 “Go grab our squad of Lifeless!” Denth said. “Now!”

 “You think he’ll live?” Tonk Fah asked.

 “He just fell out a three story window, plummeting toward certain doom,” Denth said. “Of course he’ll live! Send the squad for the front doors to slow him!” Denth paused, glancing at Vivenna. “You, princess, are far too much trouble for what you’re worth.”

 “So people are fond of telling me,” she said with a sigh.

#

 Vasher fell toward the hard stone blocks below. He watched the window retreat above him.

 Almost, he thought with frustration. I just about had him!

 Wind whistled. He screamed in frustration, pulling free the rope at his waist, Vivenna’s Breath a lively strength within him.

 “Grab things,” he Commanded, whipping it out, drawing color from his blood-stained shorts. They bled to grey, and the rope wrapped around an outcropping of stone on the side of the palace. It pulled taught, and he ran sideways along the ebony blocks.

 “Your Breath to mine,” he yelled as his momentum slowed. The rope dropped free and he landed on the first block. “Become as my Leg and give it strength!” he Commanded, drawing color from the blood on his chest. The rope twisted down, wrapping around his leg and foot as he leaped off the block. He landed on one foot, the coiled rope bearing the brunt of the shock, and he hopped off again.

 Four hops, and he hit the ground. A group of soldiers stood amidst some bodies at the front gates, looking confused. Vasher barreled toward them, translucent, colorless blood dropping from his skin as he drew his Breath back from his rope.

 He scooped a sword off of a fallen soldier. The men in front of the gates turned and readied their weapons, looking shocked.

 He didn’t have the time, or the patience, for pleasantries. He struck, cutting men down with quick efficiency. He wasn’t as good as Denth, true, but he was very well practiced.

 But there were a lot of men. Maybe even too many to fight. Vasher cursed, spinning between them, dropping another one. He bent down, slapping his hand against the waist of a fallen soldier, touching both shirt and pants.

 “Fight for me, as if you were me,” he Commanded, draining a patch of grass around him completely grey. He spun, blocking a sword strike. Another came from the side, and another. He couldn’t block them all. One came toward him.

 A swored flashed in the air, blocking the weapon that would have hit Vasher. The dead man’s shirt and trousers, having pulled themselves free, stood holding a blade. They struck, as if controlled by an invisible person inside, blocking and attacking with skill. Vasher put his back to the Awakened construct, fighting. When he had a chance, he made another one, draining away most of his remaining Breath.

 They fought in a trio, Vasher and his two sets of Awakened clothing. The guards cursed, much more wary now, keeping their distance. Vasher eyed them, planning an attack.

 At that moment, a troop of some fifty Lifeless barreled around the corner, charging toward him.

 Colors! Vasher thought, his frustration rising. He growled in rage, striking and taking down another soldier.

 Colors, colors, colors!

 You shouldn’t swear, a voice said in his head. Shashara told me that was evil.

 Vasher spun toward the sound. A little line of smoke was trailing out from beneath the closed front doors of the palace.

 Aren’t you going to thank me? Nightblood said. I came to save you.

 One of his sets of clothing fell, the leg cut free by a clever strike from a soldier. Vasher paused, then reached back, drawing the Breath back out of the second set of clothing. The soldiers paused again, wary, apparently wanting to let the Lifeless take him.

 And in that moment of peace, Vasher charged for the gates to the palace. He threw his shoulder against the door, slamming it open, skidding into the entryway.

 A large group of men lay dead on the ground. Nightblood sprouted from one of their chests, as usual, hilt pointing toward the sky. Vasher paused only briefly. Then, he ran forward and grabbed the hilt of the sword.

 And pulled it free of the sheath, which remained behind in the body.

 The blade sprayed a wave of black liquid as it flashed in the air. It dissolved into smoke before touching walls or floor, like water in an oven. Smoke twisted, some rising from the blade, some falling in a stream to the floor, dripping like black blood.

 Destroy! Evil! Nightblood’s voice boomed in his head.

 A pain shot up Vasher’s arm, and he felt his Breath being leached away, sucked into the blade, fueling its hunger. He spun toward the charging Lifeless and--enraged--attacked.

 Each creature he struck with the blade immediately flashed and became smoke. A single scratch, and the body dissolved like a piece of paper being consumed by an invisible fire, leaving behind only a puff of blackness in the air. Vasher spun among them, striking with rage, not skill, killing creature after creature. Black smoke churned around him, and his arm twisted with pain, black, vein like tendrils climbing up the hilt around his forearm. Like blood vessels that latched on, feeding off his Breath.

 In a matter of minutes, the Breath Vivenna had given him had been reduced by a half. Yet, in those moments, he destroyed all fifty Lifeless. The soldiers outside pulled to a halt, watching the display.

 Then they ran.

 Vasher screamed, spinning toward the palace building. He charged forward, slamming Nightblood through a wall. It dissolved just as easily, puffing away before him as he burst through the dissolving black smoke. He didn’t bother with a stairwell. He simply jumped onto a table and rammed Nightblood into the ceiling.

 A circle ten feet wide vanished. Dark, mist-like smoke fell around him like rain. He Awakened his rope again, then tossed it up, using it to pull himself up onto the next floor. A moment later, did it again, climbing onto the third floor.

 He spun, slashing through walls, yelling as he ran back toward Denth. The pain in his arm was incredible, and his Breath was draining away at an alarming rate. Once it was gone, Nightblood would kill him.

 Everything was growing fuzzy. He slashed through a final wall, finding the room where he had been tortured. It was empty.

 He cried out, arm shaking.

 Destroy. . .evil. . . Nightblood said in his mind, all lightness gone from the tone, all familiarity. It boomed like a command. An awful, inhuman thing. The longer Vasher held the sword, the faster it drained his Breath.

 Gasping, he threw the sword aside and fell to his knees. It skidded, tearing a rip in the ground that puffed away into smoke, but hit a wall with a pling and fell still. Smoke rose off of it, but not like it had before.

 Vasher knelt, gasping, arm twitching. The black veins, however, slowly evaporated. He was left with just barely enough Breath to reach the First Heightening. Another few seconds, and Nightblood would have sucked away Vasher’s life. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

 Something fell to the carpet in front of him. A dueling blade. Vasher looked up.

 “Stand up,” Denth said, eyes hard. “We’re going to finish our duel.”

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-seven

 Bluefingers led Siri--held by several Lifeless--up to the fourth floor of the palace. The top floor. They entered a room decorated with lavish colors, even for Hallandren. Lifeless let them pass, bowing their heads to Bluefingers.

 All the Lifeless in the city are controlled by Bluefingers and his scribes, she thought. But, even before that, they had amazing power. the Hallandrens realize that they were dooming themselves by regulating the Pahn Kahl people to such lowly--yet important--positions?

 “My people will not fall for this,” Siri found herself saying as she was pulled to the front of the room. “They won’t fight you. If it’s a losing battle, they’ll retreat through the passes. Take refuge in one of the outer kingdoms.”

 The front of the room held a black block of stone, shaped like an altar. Siri frowned. From behind, a group of Lifeless entered the room, carrying the corpses of several priests. She saw Tridees’s body among them.

 What? Siri thought.

 Bluefingers turned toward her. “We’ll make certain they’re angry,” he said. “Trust me. When this is through, princess, Iris’s people will fight until either they, or Hallandren, is destroyed.”

#

 They tossed someone into the cell next to Lightsong. He looked up with tired eyes, uncaring. It was another Returned. Which of the Gods had they taken captive this time?

 The God King, he thought. Interesting.

 He looked down again. What did it matter? He’d failed Blushweaver. He’d failed everyone. The Lifeless armies were probably already marching on Idris.

 They had all been played for fools. Hallandren and Idris would fight, and the Pahn Kahl people would have their revenge for three hundred years of being forced to live as a subject kingdom.

 #

 Vasher stood up with difficulty. He held the sword in a weak hand, looking at Denth, still shaken by the use of Nightblood. The empty black hallway was now open around them. Vasher had destroyed several of the walls.

 Corpses littered the floor, the result of whatever conflicts had happened when Denth’s men had taken over the palace.

` “I’ll let you die easily,” Denth said, raising his blade. “Just tell me the truth. You never beat Arsteel in a duel, did you?”

 Vasher raised his own blade. The cuts, the pain in his arm, the tiredness of being awake so long. . .it was all wearing on him. Adrenaline could only get him so far, and even his body could only take so much.

 “Have it your way,” Denth said, attacking.

 Vasher backed away, forced--as always--onto the defensive by Denth’s attack. Denth had always been better, at swordplay at least. Vasher had been better at research, but what had that earned him? Discoveries that had caused the Manywar.

 He fought. He fought well, he knew, considering how tired he was. But, it did little good. Denth drove his blade through Vasher’s left shoulder--Denth’s favorite place for a first strike. It allowed his opponent to keep fighting, wounded.

 “You never beat him,” Denth whispered.

#

 “You’re going to kill me on an altar,” Siri said. Around her, Lifeless placed bodies on the floor. Priests. “It doesn’t make sense, Bluefingers. You don’t worship their religion. Why do this?”

 Bluefingers stood to the side, holding a knife. She could see the shame in his eyes.

 “You don’t have to do this,” Siri said, struggling against the grip of her Lifeless.

 Bluefingers finally looked at her. “After all I’ve already done, do you think one more death will mean anything to me?”

 “After all you’ve done,” she said, “do you really think one more death will matter for your cause?”

 He glanced at the altar. “Yes,” he said. “You know how the Idrians whisper about the things that go on in the Court of Gods. They’ve never trusted the Hallandren priests and their religion. Well, we are going to let a group of those Idrian mercenaries in to see this, once you are dead. We’ll show them that we were too late to save you, that the priests had already killed you on one of their twisted altars. We’ll show them the dead priests that we slew, and apologize for not getting here in time to save their princess’s life.

 “Once rumors of this get around, the Idrians will riot in the city. They’re strained to snapping anyway--we have you to thank for that. The city will be in chaos, and there will be a slaughter like hasn’t been seen since the Manywar. Those that live will return to Idris to tell the tale. They’ll let everyone know that the Hallandrens only wanted a princess of the royal blood so that they could sacrifice her to their God King.”

 He glanced back at her. “I truly am sorry. But, the freedom of my people is more important than any one person.”

#

 I am nothing, Lightsong thought. Why couldn’t I save her? Why couldn’t I protect her?

 He was crying again. Oddly, someone else was too. The man in the cell next to his right. The God King. Susebron moaned with frustration, pounding against the bars of his cage. He didn’t speak, though, or denounce his captors.

 I wonder why that is, Lightsong thought.

 Men approached the God King’s cell. Pahn Kahl men, with weapons. Their expressions were grim.

 Lightsong found it hard to care.

 You are a God. Llarimar’s voice still challenged him. The high priest lay in his own cell, to Lightsong’s left, eyes closed against the terrors that were happening.

 You are a God. To me at least.

 Lightsong shook his head. No. I’m nothing. No God. Not even a good man.

 You are. . .to me. . .

 Water splashed against him. Lightsong shook his head, confused. Thunder sounded, oddly, in his head. It seemed distant. Nobody else seemed to notice.

 It was growing dark.

 What?

 He was on a ship. Tossing, churning, on a dark sea. Lightsong stood on the deck, trying to stay upright on the slick boards. Part of him knew it was simply a hallucination, that he was still back in the prison cell, but it felt so real.

 The dar waves churned, and his face slammed up against the cabin section of the ship. Light from a pole-mounted lantern flickered uncertainly, and seemed weak as lightning flashed in the air, violent and angry. Lightsong blinked.

 His face was pressed up against something painted on the wood. A red panther, glistening in the lanternlight and the rain.

 The name of the ship, he remembered, the Red Panther.

 He wasn’t Lightsong. Or, he was, but he was a much pudgier version of himself. A man accustomed to being a scribe. To working long hours counting up coins. Checking legers.

 Seeking for lost money. That’s what he’d done. People hired him to discover where they’d been cheated or if a contract hadn’t been paid right. His job was to look the books, searching out hidden or confusing twists of math.

 A detective, of sorts. Just not the sort he had expected.

 Waves crashed against the boat. Llarimar, looking a few years younger, yelled for help at the front of the ship. Deckhands rushed to his aid. It wasn’t Llarimar’s own ship, or even Lightsong’s. This had been borowed and intended as a simple pleasure trip. Sailing was a hobby of Llarimar’s.

 The storm had come suddenly. Lightsong lurched back to his feet, barely managing to stay up as he made his way forward, cluting the railing. Waves crashed across the deck, and sailors struggled to keep the boat from capsizing. The sails were gone, tattered. Wood creaked and cracked around him. Dark, black water churned in the ocean to his right.

 A young woman ran across the deck, grabbing ropes to help Llarimar at the front.

 “Tatara!” a woman called from the cabin, reaching a hand toward her.

 The next wave tossed the girl into the ocean. Lightsong saw her get taken by the terrible darkness, engulfed, swallowed. He’d always been a little afraid of it, and now he was terrified.

 It was the great, horrible unknown. He felt useless, standing on the deck, watching the young woman get swept into the current. The ship would quickly pass her, and he saw remnants of her golden hair twisting in the water. A weak splash of color passing his side of the ship.

 Men screamed. A woman wept. Lightsong stared at the churning deep, with its alternating froth and blackness. The terriple, terrible blackness.

 He grabbed the rope at his feet and leaped over the side of the ship. Icy water took him, but he reached out, bubbling and churning in the tempest. He barely knew how to swim, but that didn’t matter. Something passed him in the darkness.

 He grabbed her arm. He tied the rope around it, somehow managing to get it tight despite the water and the waves. As soon as he did, a surge in the undulating water yanked him away.

 Down. Into the darkness.

 Claimed by the void.

 He blinked, waves and thunder fading. He sat on the cool stones of his cell. The void had taken him, but something had sent him back. He’d Returned.

 The man beside him was yelling in fear. Lightsong looked over as the fake priests grabbed Susebron, and Lightsong could see into the God King’s mouth.

 No tongue, Lightsong though. Of course. To keep him from using all that BioChroma. It makes sense.

 He turned to the side. Blushweaver’s body lay red and bloodied. He’d seen that. Seen it in a vision. He’d thought she was blushing, when he dreamed, but now he understood. He looked back. Llarimar, eyes closed as if asleep--though he now realized the man simply had them shut against the horrors of the dungeon.

 The God King in prison. Lightsong seen that too.

 By the Colors. . . . he thought, standing up as the priests forced the God King to his knees. I saw all of this. Ireally am a God.

 Lightsong stepped forward, moving up to the bars of his cage. He saw pain and tears in the God King’s face, and somehow understood them. He did love her. Lightsong had seen the same thing in Siri’s eyes. She had somehow come to care for the man who was to oppress her.

 “You are my emperor,” Lightsong whispered. “And Lord of the Gods.”

 The Phan Khal men forced the God King face down on the stones. One of the priests raised a sword. The God King’s legs jutted out, his feet toward Lightsong.

 I have seen the Void, he thought. And I came back. I understand now.

 And then, Lightsong reached through the bars and touched the God King’s legs. A fake priest looked up with alarm.

 Lightsong met the man’s eyes, then smiled broadly.

#

 Denth struck again, wounding Vasher in the leg.

 Vasher stumbled, going down on one knee. Denth struck again, and Vasher barely managed to keep the sword away.

 Denth backed off a bit, shaking his head. “You are pathetic, Vasher. There you kneel, about to die. And you still think you’re better than the rest of us. You judge me for becoming a mercenary? What else was I to do? Take over kingdoms? Rule and start wars, as you did?”

 Vasher bowed his head. Denth growled and ran forward, lashing out with his sword. Vasher tried to defend himself, but he was just too weak. Denth’s weapon knocked his aside, then Denth kicked him in the stomach, sending him backward against the wall.

 Vasher slumped down, sword lost. He reached for a knife on the belt of a fallen soldier, but Denth stepped up and put his booted foot on Vasher’s hand. Denth looked down with distain.

 “You think I should just go back to the way I was before?” Denth said. “The happy, friendly man that everyone loved?”

 “You were a good man,” Vasher whispered.

 “That man saw and did terrible things,” Denth said, shaking his head. “I’ve tried, Vasher. I’ve tried going back. But the darkness I know. . .it’s inside. I can’t escape it. My laughter has an edge to it. I can’t forget.”

 “I can make you,” Vasher said. “I know the Commands.”

 Denth paused.

 “I promise,” Vasher said. “I will take it all from you, if you wish.”

 Denth stood for a long moment, foot on Vasher’s arm, sword pointed down. Then, finally, he shook his head. “No. I don’t deserve that. Neither of us do. Goodbye, Vasher.”

 He raised his blade to strike. And, Vasher moved his arm up, touching Denth’s leg.

 “My life to yours, my Breath become yours.”

 Denth froze, then stumbled. Fifty Breaths leached from Vasher’s chest and surged into Denth’s body. They would be unwelcome, true, but he couldn’t turn them away. Fifty Breaths weren’t many, but they were enough.

 Enough to make Denth begin to shake in pleasure. Enough to make him lose control for just a second. And, in that second, Vasher stood--ripping the dagger free from the corpse beside him--then slashed it through Denth’s throat.

 The mercenary stumbled back, eyes wide, neck bleeding. He shook amidst the pleasure of gaining new Breaths even as his life flowed from him.

 “Nobody ever expects it,” Vasher said. Stepping forward. “Breath is worth a fortune. To put it into someone, then kill them, is to lose more money than most men will probably ever know. They never expect it.”

 Denth fell over, life fading away, new Breaths and old both vanishing.

 “You wanted to know how I killed Arsteel,” Vasher said, spitting blood to the side. “Well, now you know.”

#

 Bluefingers picked up a knife. “The least honor I can do,” he decided, “is to kill you myself, rather than letting the Lifeless do it. I promise it will be quick. We will make it look like a pagan ritual afterward, sparing you the need to die in a painful way.”

 Siri struggled, tied to the altar, feeling numb. It seemed like such a strange situation to be in. Like one of the frightening stories she’d heard as a child.

 It was ridiculous. Nobody was actually killed on altars like this. It was a myth. An exaggeration. And yet, because of that very exaggeration, it would become truth. The Idrians would get what they expected.

 And the war would start.

 “Please,” she whispered.

 Bluefingers paused. He actually seemed to consider. Then, he shook his head, raising the knife. “I’m sorry.”

 The building began to shake.

 Bluefingers looked to the side in alarm, glancing toward several of his scribe friends. They shook their heads in confusion.

 “Earthquake?” one asked.

 The floor began to turn white. The color moved like a wave of sunlight across the land as the sun rose above the mountains. The walls, the ceiling, the floor--all of the black stone faded. The priests stepped away from it, looking frightened, one hopping onto a rug to keep from touching the strange white stones.

 Bluefingers looked at her, confused. He held the knife still, held it in fingers that had been stained repeatedly by the inks he often used. The ground continued to tremble, but he raised his blade anyway. And, strangely, Siri saw the whites of his eyes bend and release a rainbow of colors.

 The entire room burst with color, the white stones fuzzing and splitting, like light through a prism.

 The doors to the room exploded open. A twisting mass of colorful cloths shot through it, like the hundred tentacles of an enraged sea leviathan. They churned and curled, and Siri recognized tapestries, carpets, and long lengths of silk from the palace decorations.

 Awakened cloth slapped aside Lifeless, curling around them, tossing them aside. Priests cried out as they were snatched up, and a long, thin length of violent cloth snapped forward and wrapped around Bluefinger’s arm.

 The surging mass continued forward, undulating, churning, and Siri could finally see a figure walking in the middle of it.

 A man of epic proportions. Black of hair, white of face, youthful in appearance, but of great age. Bluefingers struggled to lower his knife, but the God King raised a hand.

 “You will stop!” Susebron said in a clear voice.

 Bluefingers froze, looking toward the God King in amazement. The dagger slipped from his stunned fingers as an Awakened carpet twisted around him, pulling him away from the altar.

 Siri strained against her bonds, trying to get a better view. She needn’t have worried. Susebron’s cloth lifted him up and over beside her, and a pair of small silken handkerchiefs reached forward, twisting around her ropes, untying them with ease.

 Freed, she grabbed him, letting him lift her into his arms, weeping.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-eight

 The closet door opened, letting in lanternlight. Vivenna looked up, gagged and bound, at Vasher’s silhouette. He drug Nightblood behind him, sheathed--as always--in his silver sheath.

 Looking very tired, Vasher knelt, undoing her gag.

 “About time,” she noted.

 He smiled wanly. “I don’t have any Breath remaining,” he said quietly. “It was very hard to locate you.”

 “Where did it all go?” she asked as he undid the ropes on her hands.

 “Nightblood devoured most of it.”

 I don’t believe him, Nightblood said happily. I. . .can’t really remember what happened. But, we did slay a lot of evil!

 “You drew him?” Vivenna asked as Vasher untied her feet.

 Vasher nodded.

 Vivenna rubbed her hands. “Denth?”

 “Dead,” Vasher said. “No sign of Tonk Fah or the woman, Jewels. I think they may have taken their money and fled.”

 “So, it’s over.”

 Vasher nodded, sliding down to seat himself, resting his head back against the wall. “And we lost.”

 She frowned. “What do you mean?”

 “Vasher was being employed by some of the Pahn Kahl scribes in the palace,” Vasher said. “They wanted to start a war between Idris and Hallandren in the hopes that it would weaken both kingdoms and let Pahn Kahl gain independence.”

 “So? Denth is dead now.”

 “So are the scribes who had the Command Phrases for the Lifeless armies,” Vasher said. “And they already sent the troops marching. They left the city over an hour ago, charging for Idris.”

 Vivenna felt a numbness.

 “All of this fighting, everything with Denth, that was secondary,” Vasher said, knocking his head back against the wall. “It distracted us. I couldn’t get to the Lifeless in time. The war is going to happen. There’s no way to stop it.”

#

 Susebron led Siri down into the depths of the palace. Siri walked beside him, carefully cradled in his arm, a hundred twisting lengths of cloth spinning around them.

 Even with that many things Awakened, he still had enough BioChroma to make every color they passed glow brightly. Of course, that didn’t work for many of the stones they passed. Though large chucks of the building were still black, a good half of it had been turned white.

 Not just the grey of normal Awakening. They had been made a bone white, the color drained completely by the God King’s Awakening. And, becoming that white, they now reacted to his incredible BioChroma, splitting back into colors.

 Like a circle, somehow, she thought. Colorful, then white, then back to color.

 He led her into a particular chamber, and she saw what he’d told her to expect. Scribes crushed by the carpets that he’d awakened, bars ripped from their mountings, walls broken down. A ribbon shot from Susebron, turning over a body so that she wouldn’t have to see its wound.

 She wasn’t paying much attention. In the midst of the rubble were a pair of corpses. One was Blushweaver, bloody and red, face down. The other was Lightsong, his entire body drained of color. Like he was a Lifeless.

 He didn’t move though. His eyes were closed, and he slept, as if at peace. A man sat next to him--Lightsong’s high priest, holding the God’s head in his lap.

 The priest looked up. He smiled, though she could see tears in his eyes.

 “I don’t understand,” she said, looking at Susebron.

 “Lightsong gave his life to heal me,” the God King said. “Somehow, he knew that my tongue had been removed.”

 “The Returned can heal one person,” the priest said, looking down at his god. “It’s their duty to decide who and when. They come back for this purpose, some say. To give life to one person who needs it.”

 “I never knew him,” Susebron said.

 “He was a very good person,” Siri said.

 “I realize that. Though I never spoke to him, somehow he was noble enough to die so that I might live.”

 The priest smiled down. “The amazing thing is,” he said, “Lightsong did that twice.”

 He told me that I couldn’t depend on him in the end, Siri thought, Smiling slightly, though sorroful at the same time. I guess he lied about that. How very like him.

 “Come,” Susebron said. “We must gather what is left of my priests. We have to find a way to stop our armies from destroying your people.”

#

 “There has to be a way, Vasher,” Vivenna said. She knelt next to him.

 He tried to push down his rage, his anger at himself. He’d come to the city to stop a war. Once again, he’d been too late.

 “Forty thousand Lifeless,” he said, pounding his fist against the floor. “I can’t stop that many. Not even with Nightblood and the Breaths of every person in the city. I wouldn’t be able to keep up with their marching, and even if I did manage to fight them, one would eventually get in a lucky strike and kill me.”

 “There has to be a way,” Vivenna said.

 Has to be a way.

 “I thought the same thing before,” he said, putting his head in his hands. “I wanted to stop it. But, by the time I realized what was happening, it had gone to far. It had taken a life of its own.”

 “What are you talking about?”

 “The Manywar,” Vasher said, sighing, closing his eyes.

 Silence.

 “Who are you?”

 He kept his eyes closed.

 They used to call him Talaxin, Nightblood said.

 “Talaxin,” Vivenna said, sounding amused. “Nightblood, that’s one of the Five Scholars. He. . . .”

 She trailed off.

 “. . .he lived over three hundred years ago,” she finally said.

 “BioChroma can keep a man alive a long time,” Vasher said, sighing and opening his eyes. She didn’t argue.

 They used to call him other things, too, Nightblood said.

 “If you’re really one of them,” Vivenna said, “then you’ll know how to stop the Lifeless.”

 “Easy,” Vasher said wryly. “With other Lifeless.”

 “That’s it?”

 “The easiest. Barring that, there aren’t many options. We can chase them down and grab them one at a time, then Break them and replace their Command phrases. But, even if you had the God King’s BioChroma, that would take weeks.

 “We could have an army fight them, but they are the army. The Hallandren forces aren’t large enough to fight the Lifeless on their own, and they wouldn’t be able to get to Idris with any semblance of speed. The Lifeless will beat them by days. Lifeless don’t sleep, don’t eat, and can march tirelessly.”

 “Ichor-alcohol,” Vivenna said. “They’ll run out.”

 “It’s not like food, Vivenna. It’s like blood. They need a new supply if they get cut and drained, or if it gets corrupted--but that takes a long time. A few will probably stop working without maintenance, but only a small number.”

 She fell silent. “Well then, we Awaken an army of our own to fight them.”

 He smiled wanly. He felt so light headed. He’d bound his wounds--the bad ones, anyway--but he wouldn’t be doing any more fighting anytime soon. Vivenna didn’t look much better, with that bloody stain on her arm.

 “Awaken our own army?” he said, sighing. “First, where would we get the Breath? I used all of yours. Even if we find my clothing that still has some in it, we’ll only have a couple hundred Breath. It takes one per Lifeless. We’re severely overmatched.”

 “The God King,” she said.

 “Can’t use his Breath,” Vasher said. “The man’s tongue was removed when he was a child.”

 “And you can’t get it out of him somehow?”

 Vasher shrugged. “I might be able to figure out a Command, given a couple of decades to study.”

 “He’s still our best option,” Vivenna said.

 “Oh? And you’ll use his power to Lifeless? Are you forgetting that we’ll need to find forty-thousand bodies to use?”

 She paused, then groaned, resting back against the wall.

 Vasher? Nightblood asked in his mind. Didn’t you leave an army behind here last time?

 He didn’t reply. Vivenna opened her eyes, however. Apparently Nightblood had decided to include her in all of his thoughts now.

 “What is this?” she asked.

 “Nothing,” Vasher said.

 No, no it’s not, Nightblood said. I remember. You talked to that priest, told him to take care of your Breath for you, should you need it again. And, you gave him your army. It stopped moving. You called it a gift for the city. Don’t you remember? It was just yesterday.

 “Yesterday?” Vivenna asked.

 When the Manywar stopped, Nightblood said. When was that?

 “He doesn’t understand time,” Vasher said. “Don’t listen to him.”

 “No,” Vivenna said, studying him. “He knows something. Tell me, Vasher.”

 He eyed her, then sighed. “You’re ask me to give Hallandren a tool, Vivenna. A terrible tool. Something worse than the Lifeless.”

 “And if those Lifeless slaughter my people?” Vivenna asked. “Could what you’re talking about give them more power than that?”

 “Yes.”

 She fell silent.

 “Do it anyway,” she said.

 He glanced at her.

 “Please, Vasher.”

 He closed his eyes again, remembering the destruction he had caused. The wars that had started. All because of the things he’d learned to create.

 “You would give your enemies such power?”

 “They’re not my enemies,” she said. “Even if I hate them. I’m realizing that.”

 He regarded her for a moment, then finally stood. “Let’s find the God King, find out if he even still lives. Then we shall see.”

#

 “My lord and lady,” said the priest, bowing with his face down before them. “We heard rumors of a plot to attack the palace. That’s why we locked you away. We wanted to protect you!”

 Siri looked at the man, then glanced at Susebron. The God King rubbed his chin in thought. They both recognized this man as one of his actual priests, rather than an imposter. They’d only been able to determine that for certain with a handful of priests men.

 They locked the others away, sending for the city guard to come in and start cleaning up the wreckage of the palace. The breeze blew Siri’s hair--red, to show her displeasure--as they stood atop the palace.

 “There, my lord!” a guard said, pointing.

 Susebron turned, walking over to the edge of the palace, his twisting cloths still Awakened and alive. In the distance, Siri could make out a smudge and what looked like smoke.

 “The Lifeless army,” the guard said. “Our scouts have confirmed that it’s marching toward Idris. Almost everyone in the city saw it pass through and out the gates.”

 “That smoke?” Siri asked.

 “Dust of its passing, my lady,” the guard said. “That’s a lot of soldiers.”

 She looked up at Susebron. He frowned. “I could stop them.”

 “My lord?” the guard asked.

 “With this much Breath,” Susebron said. “I could charge them, use these cloths to tie them up.”

 “My lord,” the guard said hesitantly. “There are forty thousand of them. They would cut at the cloth, overwhelm you.”

 Susebron seemed resolute. “I have to try.”

 “No,” Siri said, laying a hand on his chest.

 “Your people. . . .”

 “We’ll send messengers,” she said. “Promising that Hallandren won’t support the attack. My people can withdraw, ambush the Lifeless. We can send troops to help.”

 “We don’t have many,” he said. “And they won’t get there very quickly. Could your people really get away?”

 No, she thought, heart wrenching. But, you don’t know that. You’re innocent enough to believe it.

 Her people would probably survive as a whole, but many would die. Still, Susebron getting himself killed fighting the creatures wouldn’t be of much use. He had amazing power, true. But fighting so many Lifeless was well beyond the scope of what he could do.

 He saw the look in her face, and surprisingly, he read it well. “You don’t believe that they can get away,” he said. “You’re just trying to protect me.”

 Surprising how well he understands me already, she thought.

 “My lord!” a voice said from behind.

 Susebron turned, looking across the top of the palace. They’d come atop it partially to get a look at the Lifeless, but also because both Siri and Susebron were tired of being closed in tight quarters. They wanted to be in the open, where it would be harder to surprise or sneak up on them.

 A guard came out of the stairwell, then walked over, hand on sword. He bowed. “My lord. There’s someone here to see you.”

 “I don’t want to see anyone,” Susebron said. “Who are they?”

 Amazing how well he can speak, she thought. Never having had a tongue. What did Lightsong’s Breath do? It healed more than his body. It gave him the capacity to use the regrown tongue, somehow.

 “My lord,” the guard said. “The visitor. . .she has the royal locks!”

 “What?” Siri asked with surprise.

 The guard turned, and--shockingly--Vivenna stepped up onto the roof of the palace. Or, Siri thought it was Vivenna. She wore trousers and a tunic, with a sword tied at her waist, and she appeared to have a bloody wound on one arm. She saw Siri, and smiled, her hair turning yellow with joy.

 Vivenna’s hair changing? Siri thought. It can’t be her.

 But, the woman laughed, dashing across the top of the roof. Some guards stopped her, but Siri waved for them to let the woman pass. She ran over, embracing Siri.

 “Vivenna?”

 The woman smiled. “Yes, mostly,” she said. She glanced at Susebron. “I’m sorry,” Vivenna said quietly. “I came to the city to try rescuing you.”

 “That was very kind of you,” Siri said. “But, I don’t need rescuing. Not anymore.”

 Vivenna frowned more deeply.

 “And who is this, Siri?” Susebron asked.

 “My sister.”

 “Ah,” Susebron said, bowing his head cordially. “Siri has told me much about you, princess Vivenna. I wish we could have met under better circumstances.”

 Vivenna stared at the man with shock.

 “He’s not really as bad as they say,” Siri said, smiling. “Most of the time.”

 “That is sarcasm,” Susebron said. “She’s quite fond of it.”

 Vivenna turned from the God King. “Our homeland is under attack.”

 “I know,” Siri said. “We’re working on that. I’m preparing messengers to send to Father.”

 “I have a better way,” Vivenna said. “But you’ll have to trust me.”

 “Of course,” Siri said.

 “I have a friend who needs to speak with the God King,” Vivenna said. “Alone.”

 Siri paused hesitantly. Silly, she thought. This is Vivenna. I can trust her.

 She’d thought she could trust Bluefingers too. Vivenna regarded her with a curious expression.

 “If this help save Idris,” Susebron said, “then I will do it. Who is this person?”

#

 Moments later, Vivenna stood quietly on the roof of the palace, the God King of Hallandren beside her. A short distance away, Vasher stood with arms upraised, letting a couple of soldiers search him for weapons. He had wisely left Nightblood behind, and didn’t have anything else on him. He didn’t even have any Breath.

 “Your sister is an amazing woman,” the God King said.

 Vivenna glanced at him. This was the man she was supposed to have married. The terrible creature that she was supposed to have given herself to, yet hate at the same time. She’d never expected to end up like this, pleasantly chatting with him.

 She’d also never expected that she’d like him.

 It was a quick judgment. She had gotten over chastising herself for making those, though she had learned to leave herself open to reinterpet. Still, she saw kindness in his eyes, and a desire to what was right. How had a man like this ended up as God King of terrible Hallandren?

 “Yes,” she said. “She is.”

 “I love her,” Susebron said. “I would have you know this.”

 Slowly, Vivenna nodded. She believed him.

 To the side, the guards took Vasher around to a changing screen. They obviously wanted to be certain none of his clothing was Awakened. He left a few moments later, wearing a wrap around his waist, but nothing else. His chest was cut and bruised, and Vivenna thought it shameful that he should be forced to undergoe such humiliation.

 However, he suffered it, walking across the rooftop with an escort. Siri stood in the distance, watching the Lifeless churn dust in the distance.

 She’s changed so much, Vivenna thought, shaking her head. When did she become so regal, with that commanding bearing and ability to keep her hair black? Her little sister, no longer quite as little, seemed to wear the expensive dress well. It fit her. Odd.

 As Vasher approached, Siri walked back over, eyes watching him keenly. She no longer seemed to take pride in being unimportant. She wanted to be involved.

 Vasher arrived, and Susebron dismissed the guards. Behind him, the jungles extended to the north, toward Idris.

 Vasher glanced at Vivenna, and she thought he might tell her to go. However, he finally just turned away from her, looking resigned.

 “Who are you?” Susebron asked.

 “The one responsible for you getting your tongue cut out,” Vasher said.

 Susebron raised an eyebrow.

 Vasher closed his eyes, and muttered something. A Command, which Vivenna could barely hear. “Reveal that which is hidden.”

 And he started to glow. Not like a lantern would glow, not as the sun glowed, but with an aura that made colors brighter. Vivenna started, eyes opening wide as Vasher increased in size. He adjusted the wrap at his waist, making room for his growth. His chest became more firm, the muscles bulging, and the beard scub on his face retreated, leaving him smooth-cheeked.

 His hair turned golden. He still bore the cuts to his body, but they seemed inconsequential. He seemed. . .divine.

 The God King watched impassively. He was now faced by a fellow God, a man of his own stature.

 “I don’t care if you believe me or not,” Vasher said, his voice sounding more. . .noble. “But I will have you know that I left something here, long ago. A wealth of power that I promised to one day recover. I left instructions for its care, and a charge that it should not be used. The priests, apparently, took this to heart.”

 Susebron, surprisingly, dropped to one knee. “My lord. Where have you been?”

 “Paying for what I’ve done,” Vasher said. “Or, trying to. Regardless, my presence is unimportant. Stand, please.”

 What is going on? Vivenna thought. Siri looked equally confused, and the sisters shared a look.

 Susebron stood, though he kept his posture reverent.

 “You have a group of rogue Lifeless,” Vasher said.

 “I’m sorry, my lord,” the God King said.

 Vasher regarded him. Then, he glanced at Vivenna. She nodded her head. “I trust him.”

 “It’s not about trust,” Vasher said, turning back to Susebron. “But, either way, I am going to give you something.”

 “What?”

 “My army,” Vasher said.

 Susebron frowned. “But, my lord. Our Lifelss just marched away, to attack Idris.”

 “No,” Vasher said. “Not that army. I’m going to give you the one I left behind, three hundred years ago. The force by which I forced Hallandren to stop its war.”

 “Stop the Manywar, my lord?” Susebron said. “You did that by negotiation.”

 Vasher snorted. “You don’t know much about war, do you?”

 The God King paused, then shook his head. “No.”

 “Well, learn,” Vasher said. “Because I charge you with this army. Use it to protect, not attack. Only use it in an emergency.”

 The God King nodded dumbly.

 Vasher glanced at him, then sighed. “Your arms become flesh, your eyes gain sight, your feet learn to step.”

 “What?” Susebron asked.

 “It’s a Command,” Vasher said. “The one you can use to Awaken the stone statues in your city. The ones I left behind, and the new ones that have been carved. Go. There should be enough of them in here to fight down that army of Lifeless. The statues make superiror soldiers---it’s very hard to damage them.”

 Susebron nodded again.

 “Do better with them than I did,” Vasher said, turning away.

Warbreaker

Chapter Fifty-Nine

 The next day, an army of five thousand stone soldiers charged from the gates of the city, running down the pathway after the Lifeless who had left the day before.

 Vivenna stood outside the city, leaning against the wall, watching them go.

 How often did I stand beneath the gaze of those D’Denir, she thought. Never knowing their purpose? Everyone said that Peacegiver had left them behind, as a gift to the people, to remind them not to go to war. She’d always found it strange. A bunch of statues of soldiers, a gift to remind the people that war was terrible?

 And yet, they were a gift. The gift that had ended the Manywar.

 She turned, glancing at Vasher. He leaned against the city wall beside her, Nightblood in one hand. His form had returned back to that of a regular person, scraggly hair and all.

 “What was that first thing you taught me about Awakening?” she asked.

 “That we don’t know much?” he said. “That there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Commands that we haven’t discovered yet?”

 “That’s the one,” she said, turning to watch the Awakened statues charge into the distance. “I think you were right.”

 “You think?”

 She smiled. Then, she nodded at the statues. “You think they’ll stop the Lifeless?”

 “Probably,” Vasher said, shrugging. “They’ll be fast enough to catch up--the Lifeless won’t be able to march as quickly as men with stone feet, who can charge through jungles without worrying about falling or getting hurt. And, I’ve seen those things fight before. They’re really tough to beat.”

 She nodded. “So, my people will be safe.”

 “Until that God King decides to use the statues to conquer them,” Vasher said.

 She snorted. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re a grump, Vasher?”

 Finally, Nightblood said. Someone agrees with me!

 Vasher scowled. “I’m not a grump,” he said. “I’m just bad with words.”

 She smiled.

 “Well, that’s it, then,” he said, picking up his pack. “See you around.” With that, he began to walk along the pathway away from the city.

 Vivenna walked up next to him.

 “What are you doing?” he asked.

 “Going with you,” she said.

 “You’re a princess,” he said. “Stay with that girl who rules Hallandren, or go back to Idris and be proclaimed as the one who saved them. Either one will give you a happy life.”

 “No,” she said. “I don’t think so. Even if my father did take me back, I doubt that I’ll ever be able to live a happy life in a plush palace or quiet town again.”

 He grew silent.

 “You’ll think differently, after a little time on the road. It’s a difficult life.”

 “I know,” she said. “But. . .well, everything I’ve been--everything I was trained to do--has been a lie wrapped in hatred. I don’t want to go back to it, even if I don’t think I’d be the same way. I’m not that person. I don’t want to be.”

 “Who are you, then?”

 “I don’t know,” she said, nodding toward the horizon. “But I think I’ll find it out there.”

 They walked for another short time.

 “Your family will worry about you,” Vasher finally said.

 “They’ll get over it,” she replied.

 Finally, he just shrugged. “All right. I don’t really care. You might as well come.”

 She smiled.

 It’s true, she thought. I don’t want to go back. Her words hadn’t really been able to explain it, not completely. Princess Vivenna was dead. She’d died on the streets of T’Telir. Vivenna the Awakener had no desire to bring her back.

 “So,” she asked as they walked along the jungle road, “I can’t figure it out. Which one are you? Klad, who started the war, or Peacegiver, who ended it?”

 He didn’t answer immediately. “It’s odd,” he finally said, “what history does to a man. I guess people couldn’t understand why I suddenly changed. Why I stopped fighting, and why I had to bring my armies back to seize control of my own kingdom. So, they decided I was two people. A man can get confused about his identity, with things like that happening.”

 She grunted in assent. “You’re still Returned, though.”

 “Of course I am,” he said. “Even if I don’t look like one. You should have figured out that Returned can change their forms a bit.”

 She raised an eyebrow.

 “You’ve got Returned blood in you,” he said. “The royal line. Where do you think that ability to change your hair color comes from?”

 “Interesting. Does that mean I can change more than just my hair?”

 “Maybe,” he said. “Takes time to learn. Go stroll around the Hallandren Court of the Gods sometime, though. You’ll find that the Gods look exactly as they think they should. The old ones look old, the heroic ones become strong, the ones who think a Goddess should be beautiful become unnaturally voluptuous. It’s all about how they perceive themselves, deep down.”

 She nodded, her BioChroma letting her feel the jungle life around them. They’d recovered Vasher’s cloak, shirt, and trousers--the ones that Denth had originally taken from him. There had been enough Breath in those to split among the two of them and get them each to the Second Heightening. It wasn’t as much as she was used to, but it was a fair bit better than nothing.

 “So, where are we going, anyway?”

 “Ever heard of Kuth and Huth?” he asked.

 “Sure,” she said. “They were your main rivals in the Manywar.”

 “Somebody’s trying to restore them,” he said. “A tyrant of some kind. He’s apparently recruited an old friend of mine.”

 “Another one?” she asked.

 He shrugged. “There were five of us. Me, Denth, Shashara, Arsteel, and Yesteel. And, it looks like Yesteel has resurfaced, finally.”

 “He’s related to Arsteel?” Vivenna guessed.

 “Brothers.”

 “Great.”

 “I know. He’s the one who originally figured out how to make Ichor-Alcohol. I hear rumors that he’s got a new form of it. More potent.”

 “Even better.”

 They walked in silence for a time longer.

 I’m bored, Nightblood said. Pay attention to me. Why doesn’t anyone ever talk to me?

 “Because you’re annoying,” Vasher snapped.

 The sword huffed.

 “What’s your real name?” Vivenna finally asked.

 “My real name?” Vasher asked.

 “Yes,” she said. “Everyone calls you things. Peacegiver. Klad. Vasher. Talaxin. Is that last one your real name, the name of the scholar?”

 He shook his head. “No.”

 “Well, what is it, then?”

 “I don’t know,” he said. “I can’t remember the time before I Returned.”

 “Oh,” she said.

 “When I came back, however, I did get a name,” he finally said. “The Cult of Returned--those who eventually founded the Hallandren Iridescent Tones--found me and kept me alive with Breaths. They gave me a name. I didn’t like it much. Didn’t seem to fit me, considering my temper.”

 “Well?” she asked. “What was it?”

 “Warbreaker the Peaceful,” he finally admitted.

 She raised an eyebrow.

 “What I can’t figure out,” he said, “is whether that was truly prophetic, or if I’m just trying to live up to it, now that I’ve decided not to ignore it.”

 “Does it matter?” she asked.

 He walked for a time in silence. “No,” he finally said. “No, I guess it doesn’t. I just wish I knew if there really were something spiritual about the Returns, or if it were all just happenstance.”

 “Probably not for us to know.”

 “Probably,” he agreed.

 Silence.

 “Should have called you Wartlover the ugly,” she finally said.

 “Very mature,” he replied. “You really think those sorts of comments are proper for a princess?”

 She smiled broadly. “I don’t care,” she said. “And I never have to again.”